

Decorating the Homes of the Nouveau Riche: Establishing Legitimacy Through the Antique

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Introduction: Displaying Class Values

- The Victorian era brought a wave of interest in the aesthetics of the past, as drawing from the past was believed to show refinement, sophistication, and taste.
- Scholars argued that Renaissance/ Medieval architecture and design was superior, and by utilizing these aesthetics families looked to declare their own economic, social, and even racial superiority.
- Furniture spoke to a family's economic stability, social climbing, cultural conformity/ defiance, provincialism/ cosmopolitanism, morality, ancestry, and self expression.¹
- These ideas meant that the use of antique aesthetics in home decoration of the Nouveau Riche was vital to establishing their legitimacy in the upper class.



English Drawing Room of the Victorian Period, 1840-70, Narcissa Niblack Thorne, 1932-37, Art Institute of Chicago

Who Were the Nouveau Riche?

- The Nouveau Riche (New Rich) made their fortunes through the business of industrialization, overtaking the wealth of the landed gentry (old money).
- The Nouveau Riche were looked down on and criticized by the landed gentry for threatening the “good breeding” and taste of the upper class.² As a result, the Nouveau Riche attempted to assimilate into upper class culture by adopting the refined upper class tastes that the landed gentry were trying to shut them out of.
- They bought and built grand houses and furniture, investing in fine art, and adopted the politeness and etiquette that had previously defined the landed class.³
- Nouveau Riche families in Canada faced less class competition, instead using the tastes of the landed gentry to legitimize their status within the process of colonization.

The Home and Social Performance of Antiquity

- Wealthy Canadian Industrialists looked to establish themselves as the first landed gentry of the ‘new nation’ by emulating historical British architecture.
- Settlers saw British architecture as an embodiment of British superiority and sophistication.⁴
- Showing sophistication through the antique was especially important for Canadian settlers looking to assert racial superiority and justify the colonial process against local Indigenous Peoples.
- The result was the construction of countless castle-like mansion around the country, in Neo-Gothic and Tudor Revival styles.
- These mansions were meant to look like they had been on the land for generations, declaring the owners natives of their new home.⁵



Postcard (Craigdarroch), H.H. Richardson, 1890, Victoria BC. Craigdarroch Castle Archives

- Here in Victoria we see one such example with Craigdarroch, built by coal Baron Robert Dunsmuir, in a Neo-Gothic style and named after a Scottish 16th century mansion.
- Dunsmuir's involvement in local politics and construction of the local railway increased his influence in Victoria, allowing him to take on a role of importance similar to the landed gentry in Britain.
- This mansion cemented Dunsmuir's wealth, power, and importance onto the landscape, and established the family as the area's landed gentry

Faux-Antique Furniture and Social Values

- During the Victorian era, demand for antique furniture outpaced supply and furniture makers began to create reproductions of Renaissance furniture or build upon authentic antique pieces to create more lavish furniture.⁶
- This chair, found at Victoria's Craigdarroch Castle was created as a faux-antique.



Hall Chair, 1885, wood oak, 217 x 79.8 x 130 cm, Craigdarroch Castle.

- The back portion of this chair contains a narrative scene from the 17th century, likely carved in the Dutch East Indies, while everything surrounding it was added onto the original piece in Britain around 1885.
- While not original to Craigdarroch, chairs like these often filled the great halls of similar mansions and were designed to look like pieces that had been passed down through the family.
- Adorning the home with real or fake antiques was meant to falsely signal ancient family wealth, status, and respectability, central to justifying colonial hierarchy.

Conclusions: Antiquity, Colonialism, and the Home

- The use of antique aesthetics in the homes of the Nouveau Riche worked to display the values and desires of the families who lived within them.
- This newly established class looked to signal their legitimacy by implying connections to historical family wealth, sophistication and importance.
- By emulating designs deemed as superior, families could assert social superiority over the lower classes and the Indigenous people whose land was the basis for their new found fortunes.

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