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On Matters of Taste

BY NANCY HILLER

THE OTHER DAY I was telling a friend about a new house I'd seen in our town's latest "most desirable" subdivision. With 7000 square feet for a family of four, the house has 10' ceilings throughout and a chandelier with 120 bulbs in the entry hall. The building plans describe the home's style as "neotransitional." Sighing, my friend wished that the financial resources of those who can afford such grandeur could somehow be matched by a corresponding degree of taste.

"*De gustibus non disputandum*," you may respond: In matters of taste, there should be no argument. We each see the world from a different perspective. Objects have different meanings for us depending upon their associations. Since taste is inescapably subjective, it's pointless to think we can bring reason to bear in discussions of beauty and style. Anyway, it doesn't matter that we can't argue productively about such things, because they're frivolous, the icing on the cake of life.

Please! Spare me. While tolerance of others' preferences is in principle good, advocating complete relativism in matters of taste results from lazy thinking. No one can seriously deny that one man's trash is another man's treasure (or tell me I'm mistaken in preferring the look of my 1940s cut-velvet sofa to my neighbor's 1974 Naugahyde). But for thousands of years, philosophers

ABOVE: English tea, ca. 1909: décor, decorum . . . etiquette, ethics.

have understood that reason is relevant to taste.

For human beings, taste is largely a product of culture, not instinct. We learn from parents, peers, and teachers what we should and should not like, what is and is not "appropriate." Far from being only subjective and beyond the realm of argument, taste is something we are constantly developing, modifying, and refining.

Who liked her first taste of coffee? As adolescents, most of us had to mask our coffee with cream and sugar before we could take anything like pleasure in its flavor. What motivated us to swallow so many cups of this bitter libation in an effort to learn to enjoy it? Perhaps we wanted to emulate our more sophisticated friends, or to claim our own place in a tradition we associate with artists, writers, and European cafés. Some of us went on to become connoisseurs.

THE SAME CAN BE SAID about the decorative arts. As children, most of us preferred bold shapes, bright colors, and lots of shine. As we mature, we learn to appreciate other elements of design, such as the ways in which horizontal and vertical elements of a building's façade relate to each other, or the subtleties of figure and grain in a table's wooden top. While only some of us develop aesthetic appreciation through formal training, almost all of us gradually develop a degree of [continued on page 38]

sophistication through associations that various artistic and architectural elements possess for us, which enable us to endow a newly encountered object with the positive value held for us by the things it brings to mind.

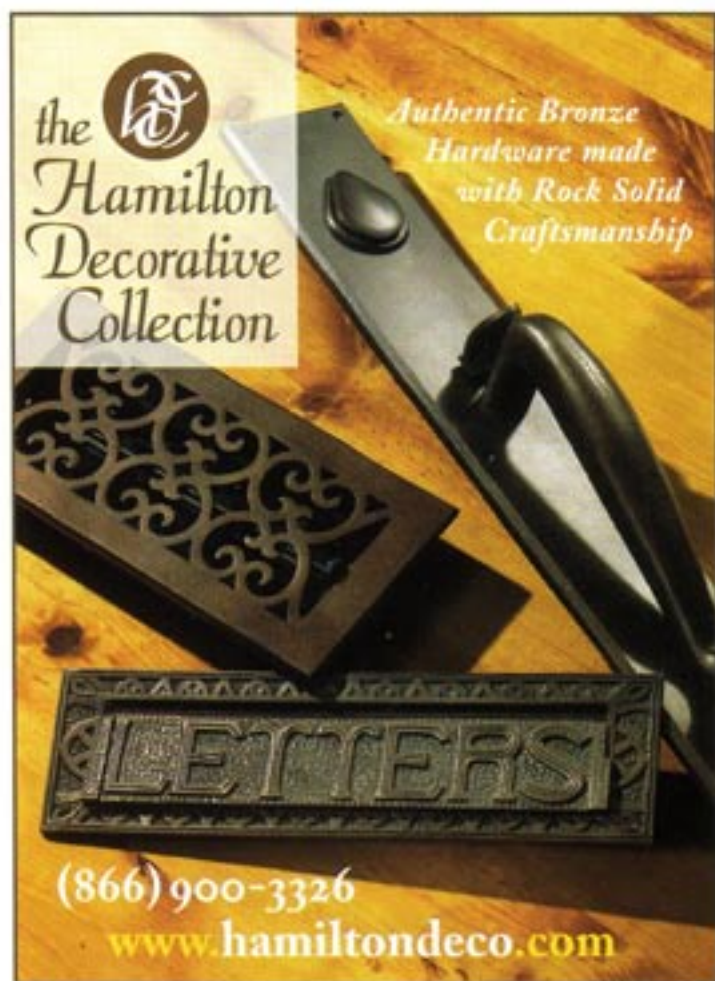
Consider the rebirth of interest in 20th-century ranch houses. I, for one, used to swear this was the style I could never learn to like. But recently, I've come to appreciate the ranch style's place on a continuum of 20th-century design that I associate with such idealists and iconoclasts as Klimt and Klee. The association has sweetened my perception of the horizontal lines, dark wooden beams, and cold terrazzo floors that used to repulse me. I am able to discern and savor in many "ranch" elements the influence of architects whose work I admire.


Perhaps the most common example of how aesthetic perceptions can be affected by associations may be the influence of "grandma's house" on current kitchen design. It's a rare soul for whom the idea of "grandma's kitchen" does not conjure associations of comfort and plenty; we should not be surprised by the popularity of kitchens designed to evoke such positive feelings.

IN EACH OF MY EXAMPLES, taste may be seen as *implicitly* expressing value. Ranch style has grown on me because I associate it with movements that I respect; old-fashioned, painted kitchens have become popular because we associate their style with happy memories. But taste can express values *explicitly* as well. Think about linoleum, a product that's becoming popular even for new homes, not just for its looks (because a few sheet vinyls are almost indistinguishable from it), not only for its nostalgic appeal, but because the materials from which it's made are natural and sustainably produced. Think about the growing fondness for smaller homes, which require less consumption of energy and materials. Or think about practical objects made by skilled artisans using traditional techniques.

Those of us who consider such things attractive do so precisely because those things are consistent with values we avow: healthy environment, the self-discipline and perseverance required to become skilful in a trade.

Conversely, what offends our values will repel us. When my friend wished that good taste could somehow be provided in equal measure to financial resources, she



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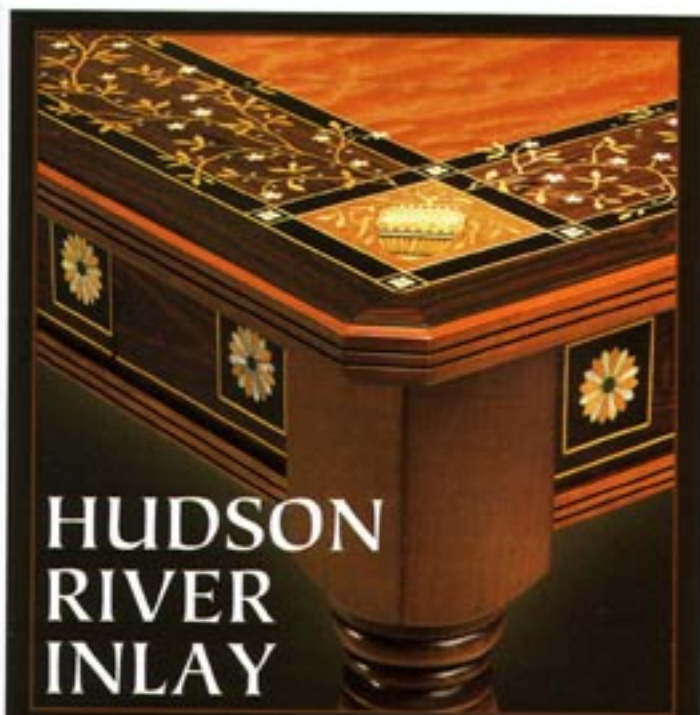
was in part lamenting the values expressed in the oversized house—most notably, conspicuous consumption. This is because beauty and goodness are inextricably linked, arguments to the contrary notwithstanding.

Even the etymology of the words “good” and “beautiful” supports this assertion: our word “beauty” comes from the Latin *bellus*, a diminutive form of *bonus*, which means good. There is a sense in which a thing cannot be beautiful without being good. Whenever I talk about goodness and beauty, I imply a perceiving subject to whom a thing appears beautiful or good: I need not subscribe to the notion of some objective, universally acceptable standard. I can accept that the goodness of an object may depend on the purpose for which it is used, the goodness of a deed may vary with the reason it is done, etc. I can also say “a thing cannot be beautiful unless it is good” knowing fully that something which is bad or intended to further a shameful cause can appear beautiful. The point is, once we know about the object’s connection with something we deem bad, or once we comprehend that beyond the beauty of a surface exists an ugly reality, the

object, deed, or whatever will cease to be beautiful to us for as long as we keep its “badness” in mind. Our minds cannot associate beauty with badness and still perceive it as beautiful.

ETYMOLOGY can offer another perspective on beauty and values. Consider “décor” and “decorum.” How often do we think of these words being related? Decorum typically relates to manners and propriety, aspects of social life that are nice enough, but in our day far down the scale of matters we deem weighty. When we think about decorum in this vein, we may not be surprised to see it associated with something as “lite” as décor.

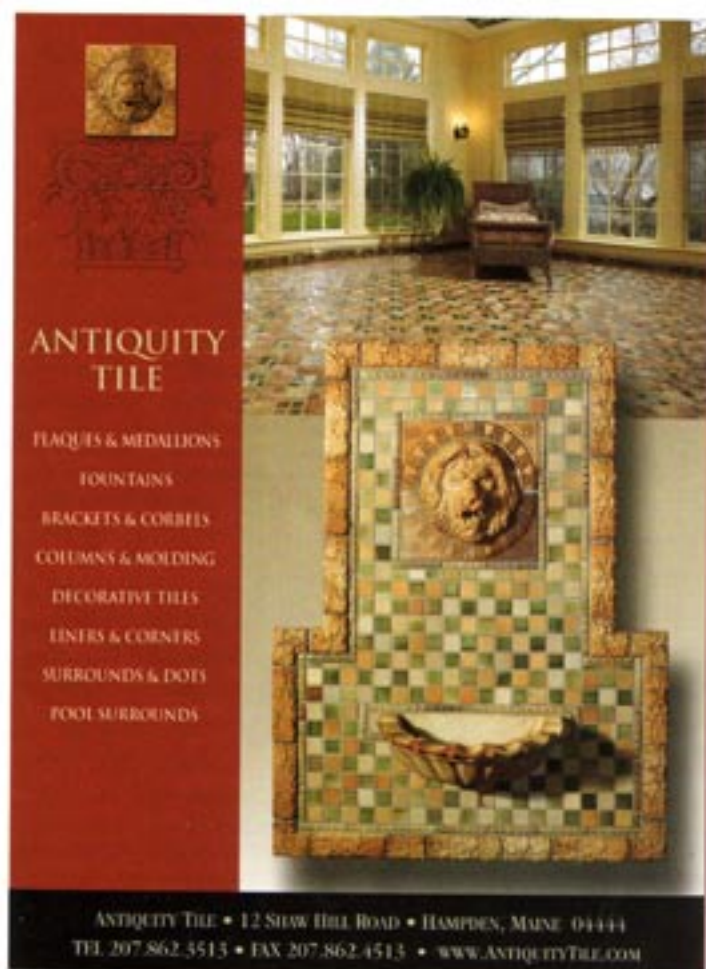
But recall how Wilfred Owen used the word “decorum” in his poem decrying the massive violence of the First World War. When Owen wrote “*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*”—it is sweet and honorable to die for one’s country—in commentary on the excruciating death of soldiers poisoned by mustard gas, he was being sarcastic, not literal. When the word “decorum” is used in this sense, it becomes almost impossible to imagine that it



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could have anything to do with matters as supposedly inconsequential as décor.

The concepts of honor and decoration, so seemingly unrelated, are united at their root by the notion of what is fitting. Each implies a context: fitting to what, or in what situation? It may indeed be honorable to die for one's country—if the cause for which one is required to risk one's life is just, and if the authority requesting that sacrifice is legitimate. In the absence of these conditions, however, to die "for one's country" is a tragic waste, the abuse of an individual's honor.

Where décor is concerned, how do we determine what is fitting? Some people like chrome and glass, others leather. Most readers of *Old-House Interiors* will agree that 1970s-style flower-power wallpaper does not belong in a Victorian house. Yet I don't doubt that there are knowledgeable professionals in the field of historic preservation and interior design willing to argue about this. It may be impossible to judge worthiness between competing expressions of beauty, as a degree of cultural relativism is an undeniable aspect of human reality.

Still, the word "decorate" has historically connoted honor, respect, and recognition (hence its use in a military context). A soldier may be decorated for wounds suffered in action. A medic may be decorated for going beyond the call of duty to save a fellow's life. Granted, which wallpaper to hang, or whether to buy a Frank Lloyd Wright reproduction vase, are not decisions with the power to prolong life or cause death. Yet in both the military and domestic senses, decoration can express honor, recognition, and respect. In deciding how to decorate, we can consider the house's history. We can recognize the families that have lived there, the tradespeople who built it, and the now-irreplaceable materials. Insofar as home is an expression of identity, we can honor those values we hold dear through our decorating choices. Conceiving of decoration in these terms at least suggests a more thoughtful approach than simply responding to promptings from the marketplace.

Taste is not simply subjective, or beyond the influence of reason. Our values play a large part in determining what we do and do not find lovely. Beauty is indeed in the eye of the beholder. But when someone cites this truism in a disagreement about taste, the saying may not so much preclude argument as invite it. ✦

NANCY HILLER is a cabinetmaker in Bloomington, Ind., with a background in religious ethics.