**Housekeeping: Shine, Polish, Gloss and Glaze**

**as Surface Strategies in the Domestic Interior**

**Victoria Kelley**

**Introduction: Glass–Case Objects**

In our great museums of decorative arts, the things that represent the domesticity of the Victorian and Edwardian period—whether clothes, furniture, furnishings, ceramics, silver or other household objects—give the impression, on the whole, of being pristine. They may carry subtle signs of age, but they have certainly not had a hard life. And even if the marks of bodies, the imprints of use, ingrained dirt and stains *are* detectable, the isolation of the glass case encourages us not to notice them; strategies of display conceal process in favour of discrete and frozen objects, objects that Constance Classen, in her analysis of touch in museums, describes as “timeless” and “eternal” (282). This is not perhaps surprising: the connoisseurs who first assembled the collections that many of our museums are based upon often sought the “best” examples of every category of art and design, in terms of state of preservation, as well as of original conception, materials or execution (Pearce 387–389). In recent years, museums have begun to acknowledge that their pristine objects were once part of life outside the glass case: captions and labels now often reference the *relationships* between objects and owners, referring perhaps to the preferences and purchasing decisions of a real or hypothetical consumer. An example is the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, where, in the British Galleries, elite consumption is demonstrated through objects that belonged to the eighteenth–century actor David Garrick (V&A Room 118a). Yet we are not encouraged to think about the *ongoing,* *physical* interactions between museum objects and the people who once owned and used them, or to consider processes, the fact that things became dirtied, broken and worn, and that their owners washed and cleaned and polished them. This reflects the assumption that objects that are battered, tattered or dirty are somehow spoiled, a notion that is longstanding, widespread, and in many respects perfectly reasonable, in museum–keeping as in house–keeping. But however reasonable the notion, it has kept hidden both the effects of wear and tear, and, perhaps more importantly, the complicated efforts that people (housekeepers of the nineteenth century, museum conservators of the twenty–first) put into forestalling such processes, or attempting to wind back their effects.

Yet despite the lack of acknowledged attention paid by museums to the processes of dirtying and cleansing, of wear and tear and maintenance, it is almost a truism to declare that Victorian and Edwardian society attached great importance to keeping things clean, maintained and in good order, and particularly in the domestic sphere. Beneath Victorian practices of maintenance lie many contested ideologies and practices, which this chapter will attempt to trace. In all of this, *surface qualities* are paramount: both wear and tear and maintenance are played out across the surfaces of objects. Surface is a comparatively neglected issue in the history of design and material culture. It could be argued that the surface qualities of objects have been played down in a rhetoric of design that has valued form over surface, applied decoration or finish, prioritising “depth” over the “superficiality” of applied techniques in an ontological opposition of surface and depth, with greater value accorded to the latter (Miller 71–96). If the starting point for this analysis is to consider surface in relation to wear and tear and maintenance, this suggests that it is also necessary to look at the surface qualities of newly–made goods, the original effects before processes of maintenance have commenced. I will argue that the two issues—new surfaces and surface maintenance—interact with each other in systems of aesthetic preference that in turn relate to class, gender, and even modernity.

**Evidence: Object and Process**

The primary sources that tell us about late nineteenth and early twentieth–century domestic interiors are varied: diverse visual representations; factual written accounts in the form of diaries and autobiographies; fictional descriptions; the abundant genre of advice literature; inventories that document the contents of rooms and homes; and a huge range of commercial sources listing, describing, representing and promoting the goods available to consumers.[[1]](#footnote-1) The secondary literature on the subject uses all these sources, and constitutes a rich and developed field of historical inquiry into the material embodiment of complicated value systems, in which ideas about morality, religion, political economy, gender, social status, taste and comfort were all played out. The writings of Thad Logan on the Victorian parlour, of Deborah Cohen on nineteenth–century material possessions more generally, and of Margaret Ponsonby on the early nineteenth–century home, are all recent examples of scholarship that proposes sensitive strategies for understanding the material culture of domesticity. All acknowledge or even emphasise the relationships between people and their domestic things. What requires further exploration is the fact that these interactions occur most obviously on the surfaces of objects, as wear and tear and dirt degrade them, and techniques of maintenance and housekeeping repudiate that process of degradation. In the initial exercise of taste in consuming decisions, qualities such as style, form, balance, proportion, material and colour are important, alongside surface effects of finish or polish. Yet in the day–to–day relationship of a person and an object, surface is the physical quality that registers the greatest interaction, as it is the only attribute that can be changed with relative ease. And not only *can* it be changed, but it may well change, regardless of its owner’s intent: many surfaces are mutable, fragile and demanding of attention.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Which of the sources on the domestic interior can best allow an understanding of surface, both in its original condition and as the site of ongoing processes of interaction between people and things? When it comes to process, advice literature is by far the richest source. By their very nature, books that advise tend to advise *action*; things to do, routines to establish, processes to follow. A cluster of didactic books on interior decoration published in the 1870s and 1880s aligned themselves with attempts, dating back to mid–century, to reform design and taste in response to the perceived inadequacies of Victorian industrial manufactures. Examples include Charles Locke Eastlake’s very influential *Hints on Household Taste* (1868), Rhoda and Agnes Garrett’s *Suggestions for House Decoration* (1876), Mrs (Lucy) Orrinsmith’s *The Drawing Room* (1878) and Robert Edis’s *Decoration and Furniture of Town Houses* (1881). All of these books demonstrate an interest in the aesthetics of surface effects, and in wear and tear and maintenance in furniture and furnishings. An example is Edis’s consideration of floor coverings for a hallway:

Oilcloth and linoleum are generally unsatisfactory; the painted pattern of the one soon becomes unsightly, while the general tone of the latter used in plain colours is unpleasant, the pattern work being liable to wear out in a few years, and, as in oilcloth, to present an untidy and unsatisfactory appearance. (*Decoration and Furniture* 41–2)

“How to do” advice on housekeeping focuses less on the decoration of the home than on the physical and moral repercussions of its upkeep. Published both as household advice manuals and as numerous magazine advice columns, this genre shows an interest in wear and tear and maintenance, alongside the pressing and closely related issue of domestic cleanliness. Phillis Browne, for instance, in a chapter on “House–cleaning” in an 1883 book entitled *Our Homes and How to Keep Them Healthy*, prescribes in minute detail all the many tasks that must be carried out to keep a home clean and tidy (869–94). The emphasis is on cleanliness, methods to remove dirt and dust of every description from every crevice and cranny of the home, from basement kitchen to bedroom fireplace, from front step to back door. The advice given is characterized by its exactitude and temporal prescriptiveness: the frequency with which tasks must be repeated is strictly set. The reader is left with no doubt, from the opening rhetoric (“where dirt reigns, disease, misery, and crime stand erect around his throne” (869)) to the closing rallying cry (“when we have once realised the fact that dirt is the parent of disease ... we shall not hesitate to take trouble to lay down plans and adopt methods for its removal” (894)) that the dominant message is one of morally–inflected soap–and–water cleanliness in the pursuit of health. Not surprisingly, many of the techniques described concern surfaces; yet alongside the emphasis on cleanliness, there is also a consideration of the sorts of surface that will be damaged or compromised by water, soap and scrubbing. Thus Browne acknowledges Florence Nightingale’s well–known condemnation of dry dusting, with its tendency to stir up, rather than to remove, dust particles, yet she admits that the damp cloth recommended by Nightingale cannot be used on polished furniture without damaging that polish (875). She also notes that “all brass and steel work in a kitchen should be kept bright and shining. The general aspect of the place depends greatly upon this being done” (886). These and other examples suggest that Browne’s concerns extend beyond cleanliness as hygiene, pure and simple, and take us into the realm of the symbolic and aesthetic properties of, in particular, shiny, polished and highly finished surfaces. Textile examples from the period reinforce this point. Linen, whether used for garments or for household textiles such as tablecloths, was often given a smooth “glossed” finish, laboriously achieved both in original manufacture and in domestic maintenance by the application of heat and pressure via a glass or metal calendar or metal iron. Such finish had no practical purpose or hygienic function, but was nevertheless strongly advocated in advice literature, including that by Browne (*Common-sense Housekeeping* 191–3).

Browne’s prescriptions read like surface *fanaticism*. I suggest that this emanated from a central concern with cleanliness and dirt, wear and tear and maintenance, but that it circled widely to capture a number of other related issues to do with the quality and nature of manufactured surface effects, and the relationship of the home to a dynamic and often chaotic urban environment. It has been rightly argued that written advice does not always translate directly into actual practice (Lees–Maffei, “Studying Advice” 3–5): it is often more about ideals than realities. Yet in a subject as symbolically rich as this one, ideals can be just as interesting as realities. As Alison Clarke has noted, discussing the domestic interiors of more recent times, what people *aspire to* may be just as important to them as what they actually achieve (23–45). Advice literature can indeed be extreme, mirroring in over–exaggerated and dogmatic ways ideas that may be much more muted and nuanced in practice. For this reason, I do not propose Mrs. Browne’s surface fanaticism as a condition of most Victorian householders and housekeepers; rather I suggest that writings such as hers shaped and reflected a condition of *surface anxiety*, a nagging unease that characterised many of the relationships between people and objects. And I also suggest that alongside this was an opposite tendency to *surface delight*—the other point of the triangle, where material surface qualities became both aesthetically pleasing and expressive of positive social values. Other sources reinforce this point, and provide a useful counterbalance to advice literature: autobiographies are often descriptive of the minutiae of domestic life and its repetitive processes, and in them we find much stronger evidence of the potential for delight, as well as a record of the anxiety that a concern with surface could bring. The descriptions of late nineteenth–century social investigators, who often described the material culture of their subjects in great detail, are also useful. Both these latter sets of sources take us into working–class life: one of the aims of this chapter is to extend the consideration of the domestic interior from the middle–class parlour into other, more humble homes, and to begin to consider how class and economic difference were reflected in taste.

**Surface Anxiety**

*Slick new surfaces*

By the mid–nineteenth century the significant growth of the urban middle classes fuelled an ever–growing demand for new houses, furniture and furnishings. This demand was met in part with increasingly industrial rather than craft–based production, or at least production that employed industrial or semi–industrial techniques, such as batch–production and the use of machinery in some processes (Edwards 24–32). One of the results was a crisis of confidence, not only in the design of consumer goods, but also in their perceived quality (Garrett and Garrett 13–14; Edwards 31). Robert Edis, writing in 1881, noted the “wretched, scamping” nature of houses constructed by speculative builders: “the miserable deal joiners’ work is glossed over with imitation graining of other woods, the still worse plaster work is made to look fair and pleasant to the eye by a coat or two of distemper” (Decoration and Furniture 91–92). His emphasis is on the poor quality of workmanship, poor quality that cannot be hidden by attempts at surface disguise.

Part of Edis’s argument concerns decoration, reflecting a fierce debate over the correct approach to surface pattern that had raged since mid–century or before.[[3]](#footnote-3) The issue of decorative pattern is beyond the scope of this chapter, which concentrates on other sorts of surface qualities to do with polish, varnish, wear and tear, but these two classes of surface effects are clearly linked in the notion of *honesty*, or its opposite. Many reformers detested the sort of illusionistic representational patterns that were often applied to wallpapers and household textiles. Their rhetoric was satirised by Charles Dickens in *Hard Times* when he had the unfortunate schoolgirl Sissy Jupe reprimanded for her fondness for wallpaper decorated with pictures of horses: “you never meet with quadrupeds going up and down walls; you must not have quadrupeds represented upon walls” (52). There was also disapproval of the sort of surface techniques that attempted to make one material look like another (Lubbock 243, 256). Writing in the 1880s, Edis is emphatic upon this point, on the grounds of quality, but also on the grounds of truth:

To carry into our houses the shadow of unreality, by graining or marbling in imitation of the real materials, by giving to cast iron the semblance of wrought, by putting up papers painted to represent various woods, tiles, or marble, is simply teaching a lie, and asserting in the worst possible taste the semblance of a truth which does not exist; and when the best graining or marbling in the world is done, it is but a miserable satire on the real material. All striving after imitation and unreality is utterly at variance with good taste in decoration, as in life. (Decoration and Furniture 21–2)

Edis’s outcry would seem to offer evidence both of the commonplace use of imitative surface techniques and of one influential commentator’s distrust of them. Yet techniques such as graining, marbling and veneering had not always been so criticized. In skilled hands they could produce refined effects. Historians Clive Edwards and Margaret Ponsonby both note the change in status of wood veneering, which had been a staple of furniture making and interior decoration since the late seventeenth century (Edwards 32–4; Ponsonby 96). Ponsonby describes how it declined from “highly skilled work” associated with “expensive and smart goods” in the eighteenth century to become in the nineteenth “an inexpensive way of making cheap furniture look more expensive” and a sign of “superficiality and sham” (96).

Robert Edis’s dislike of the imitative surface is echoed by his contemporaries. Both Mrs. Orrinsmith and Agnes and Rhoda Garrett critique dominant taste, their comments focused on surface effects and the lack of quality they are seen to express. Mrs. Orrinsmith notes that the typical “ordinary lower middle–class drawing room” is a room of “showy discomfort,” characterised by “brand–new gloss,” “the pursuit of brightness,” and “tawdry garishness” (2). Agnes and Rhoda Garrett condemn “cheap and showy” furniture marred by unwanted “brilliance” (16) and goods in which “faulty construction” (29) is concealed by “a mass of senseless ornament and a misleading shimmer of French polish” (34). Margaret Ponsonby invokes Charles Dickens’s Veneering family from *Our Mutual Friend*, whose “bran–new” house is the very embodiment of *nouveau riche* pretension, and whose name itself is taken from that degraded process of dressing up cheap furniture to showy effect. Ponsonby also cites John Ruskin’s analysis (in a letter to the editor of the *Times* newspaper) of William Holman Hunt’s painting *The Awakening Conscience*, in which a kept mistress entertains her lover in a room furnished with objects of “fatal newness” that signal her moral degradation (96–97).[[4]](#footnote-4) Ponsonby’s argument is that both of these examples evidence the extent to which new things in too great a profusion betrayed the recent origins of a family’s money: if no inherited goods were available, the remedy was to buy a sprinkling of second–hand furniture: “it is possible that good–quality, if slightly old goods were seen as desirable since they carried status with their patina” (97).[[5]](#footnote-5) Certainly in the case of the Veneerings, the newness and shininess of their furniture seems intended by Dickens to symbolise the newness and superficiality of their social relationships, which he satirizes fiercely. Ruskin’s letter speaks of “terrible lustre” as well as “fatal newness” (Ruskin page number), and Dickens claimed of both the Veneerings themselves and their “bran–new” possessions that “the surface smelt a little too much of the workshop, and was a trifle stickey” (17). The surfaces described by Ruskin and Dickens, by Edis, Orrinsmith, and the Garretts, are heavily decorated, shiny and glossy, tacky with barely–dried varnish and slick with excessive polish: as such, they appear to have provoked anxiety in many contemporary commentators.

Anthropologist Daniel Miller suggests that anxiety over surface effects seen to be “excessive” is not accidental, but rather the result of “The pervasive ideology of what may be called ‘depth ontology’ whereby we tend to assume that everything that is important for our sense of being lies in some deep interior and must be long–lasting and solid, as against the dangers of things we regard as ephemeral, shallow or lacking in content” (71). Miller’s remarks come in the context of an ethnographic analysis of fashion in Trinidad. The conspicuous consumption he documents (based on fieldwork of the late 1980s) functions as part of a social and aesthetic system that prioritises the “superficial” in both objects and interpersonal relations, but which is misunderstood and condemned on that account by its many critics. Yet Miller finds a rationale for the behaviour he describes, in both black diasporic experience and in his subjects’ responses to modernity. This example functions as a gentle reminder to consider the values and the meanings of aesthetic effects to the people who create and consume them, as well as to those who criticize them. Another reminder comes from historian Peter Thornton, in his description of decorative “density,” or the Victorian “cluttered look” (320), a feature of some nineteenth–century domestic interiors condemned by reformist critics in its own time and derided even more fiercely through satire by a generation of “post–Victorians” in the early decades of the twentieth century (Woolf 163). The cluttered look might stand as a parallel case to the too–glossy surface. It is a domestic design strategy characterized by its extreme nature that is today aesthetically indigestible, though it may be socially intelligible. Thornton urges his readers, simply and generously, to “remember that most Victorians liked it: it did not seem cluttered to them” (320). And indeed much of the recent historiography of the Victorian domestic interior is generous to the cluttered look, analyzing it on its own terms and finding ways to explore its meanings to the people who created it and lived with it. I make a plea for as generous and complex an understanding of the material surfaces of objects, of all types and qualities, and in use and wear.

*Dirt, germs and urban chaos*

Certain surfaces provoked anxiety because of their association with poor quality goods of high aspiration but low actual status; a further source of surface anxiety arose from a concern with hygiene and dirt’s perceived relationship to disease. This is where new surface effects come together with wear and tear and maintenance.

Shirley Foster Murphy’s *Our Homes and How to Keep Them Healthy* (the volume which contains Phillis Browne’s advice on house–cleaning, cited earlier) opens with a chapter by Benjamin Ward Richardson, which sets out the basic principles of “Health in the Home.” After describing all the diseases that may arise from unhealthy homes (a very long list, starting with typhus), Richardson articulates the “seven principles” of a “healthy home.” The first is: “it must present no facilities for holding dusts or the poisonous particles of disease; if it retain one it is likely to retain the other” (31–32).

*Our Homes* also contains a section on “Internal Decoration” written by Robert Edis. As might be expected, Edis reiterates much of the advice given in his *Decoration and Furniture of Town Houses*, but with the addition of a detailed consideration of hygiene and its relationship to decorative taste. He starts with lengthy quotations from a recent letter to the *Times* by a “well–known surgeon” describing his experience in moving into a London house. The correspondent dwells in detail upon the dangers of dust:

There were wardrobes and other pieces of furniture, which had their apparent height increased by cornices, within which were hollow spaces, seemingly made on purpose to form harbours for dirt. There were ponderous bookshelves, containing a formidable amount of printed lumber, and a still more formidable amount of dust. The walls were old with uneven surfaces, and to these uneven surfaces dirt clung with an almost touching tenacity. There were all sorts of fluffy things about, which were supposed to be ornamental, fancy mats and the like, and which blackened the fingers of any one bold enough to touch them ... Upon all these things the dirt of a London street poured in without intermission. In dry weather the dust found its way through every chink; in wet weather the feet of visitors brought in mud, which dried into dust speedily. (“Internal Decoration” 325–326)

The 1870s and 1880s saw the development of germ theory and the beginnings of scientific understanding of the spread of disease. In the 1880s echoes of germ theory found their way into the popular press and advice literature, and from there into the public consciousness. Gwen Raverat, born in Cambridge in the 1880s, recalls an incident from her early childhood: “a mischief–making doctor promulgated the revolting theory that all milk must be BOILED! Because of *Germs*; of which we now heard for the first time, and in which we vehemently declined to believe” (55). One result of germ theory was that dust (in which germs were found under microscopic investigation) was feared as a potent carrier of disease. A later domestic advice writer emphasized how germs were both *invisible* and *ever–present*:

Disease, in the majority of cases, comes from microbes, or as they are often called, germs. These are actually disease seeds. They are seeds so small that they cannot be seen by the naked eye. They gain entrance to the body through the air breathed, or in liquid drunk, or in some other way. No matter how careful we are none of us can be sure of keeping out of their way. (Stacpoole 8)

Edis’s advice in *Our Homes* includes detailed recommendations for dust–free floor coverings, furniture and wallpapers (326–332, 338). This sort of advice is a feature of the writings of Agnes and Rhoda Garrett and Mrs. Orrinsmith too, with a particular emphasis on the evils of the fitted carpet, seen as an enormous and uncleanable dust–trap: “the thicker, the woollier, the richer [a carpet], the greater its capacity for the reception and retention of dust” (Orrinsmith 53). Edis, the Garretts, Orrinsmith, and Browne all recommend hard surfaces for floors, such as parquet blocks or floorboards that have been stained and varnished or painted. Mrs. Orrinsmith recommends staining and polishing with “ancient and wholesome beeswax and turpentine ... If the polishing is effectually done in the first instance, it requires but a slight amount of daily brushing to preserve brightness” (54). On top could be laid rugs small enough to be regularly taken outside and beaten clean (Garrett and Garrett 69; Orrinsmith 50–5; Browne, “House–cleaning” 881).

Thus fear of dust lay behind many of the edicts of domestic advice literature, and had a particularly strong relationship to the polished surface and its maintenance. If the excessive polish of newly–made and pretentiously ostentatious furniture could show up social insecurities, then the smooth, impermeable surfaces of polished objects more generally were also perfectly suited to showing up dust, rendering it visible, in contrast to the textured or permeable surfaces of items such as carpets or flocked wallpapers. As applied to parquet blocks or varnished floorboards, polish (preferably the right sort of not too excessive polish) could be indicative of cleanliness because it kept dust and dirt on the surface, where it could be both seen and easily removed. This returns us to surface ontology: what is of the surface is unimportant, trivial—and trivial dirt is easily dealt with. Yet the constant reappearance of dust on polished surfaces meant that however easily removed, it could also never be forgotten. Those responsible for its removal could never rest. As Browne noted, with an air of almost sadistic melancholy, “the moment which finds a room perfectly clean is the moment in which it begins to get dirty again” (“House-cleaning” 869).

The anxiety associated with surfaces and dirt was strongly affected by the relationship of the home to the world around it, particularly in urban areas. The nineteenth–century industrial city was sufficiently filthy that numerous commentators decried the smoky, sooty atmosphere that insinuated grime into every crevice, inside and out. Robert Edis raged against coal, questioning how long society would be “content to pollute the common air with smoke ... to sow broadcast the evils which work the destruction of everything within our homes, and cover the delicate leaves of the trees in our squares, and the flowers of the earth, with black, filthy corruption?” (“Internal Decoration” 169). He also denounced the “marvellous impurity” of gas lighting, the uncertain quality of water supplies, and the constant chaos caused by excavations to lay or repair gas and water mains, to repave streets and to construct new urban projects (“Internal Decoration” 169–170). We have already seen, in the letter that Edis cites, how external chaos was felt to impinge upon the home; “the dirt of a London street poured in without intermission. In dry weather the dust found its way through every chink; in wet weather the feet of visitors brought in mud, which dried into dust speedily” (“Internal Decoration” 325–6). Historian Lynda Nead, in *Victorian Babylon*, shows a photograph (44) of the construction of London’s Underground system in its early phases in the 1860s, which depicts both domesticity and the encroaching chaos caused by development in shocking proximity: a group of women and children pose in conventional family portrait style on the terrace of their house, but “nothing stands between this house and the immense excavation works next door. The terrace wall literally marks the limit of demolition” (40.)

Rapid urban growth and development meant that the nineteenth–century city was in a state of constant flux, as modernity was constructed in a piecemeal frenzy upon foundations of varying age and decrepitude. In this context, the clean and polished surfaces of the domestic interior were vulnerable and hard of maintenance, but they were also perhaps an important psychological bulwark against external chaos. The preservation of order, on a small scale and in a strictly defined and bounded locality (the home) constituted an important symbol of domesticity, particularly for the women who were chiefly responsible for the battle against the dirt and disorder that both originated in and represented the external environment.

*Women’s work and surface maintenance*

Despite the many modifications and caveats to the idea of the nineteenth–century “separate spheres”,[[6]](#footnote-6) it is undoubtedly true that the domestic work of cleanliness and maintenance was largely the responsibility of women, whose social identity was bound up with the home to a far greater extent than was most men’s. Browne, in her detailed advice, describes a normative middle–class household in which a mistress directs work, and female servants carry it out (“House-cleaning” 869–894). The work required to keep a large household clean and orderly was considerable, its difficulties compounded by the additional requirement that processes of cleaning and maintaining be *kept invisible* to those who were not responsible for them (Browne, “Common-sense Housekeeping” 41–42). Mark Girouard has described how in the English country house of the nineteenth century servants and their work were physically segregated. Kitchens, sculleries and laundry rooms were located in service wings and basements, linked to other parts of the house by networks of back stairs and service corridors (285). Less grand urban homes were organized around a vertical separation, with service rooms in the basement and servants’ bedrooms in the attic.[[7]](#footnote-7) Segregation was also achieved temporally, with servants carrying out processes of maintenance in the main rooms of the home at periods when they were not inhabited. Thus in tracing out the anxieties associated with the wear and tear and maintenance of domestic objects and their surfaces, it is necessary to consider the unacknowledged character of much domestic labor. Servants were often overloaded with work, but were nevertheless condemned to be discrete, even furtive, in its completion. Except in the grandest houses, where managerial duties were delegated to senior servants, mistresses suffered from the anxiety of the middle–manager who has to direct the labor of often poorly skilled or unreliable staff, but in a way that did not disturb the notion of home as a site of leisure, and not of labor. In lower middle–class households with few or perhaps just one servant, mistresses also had to contribute physically to a great deal of the labor of maintenance, although again in an unobtrusive manner.

The analysis above is based on upper and middle–class experience. Much of the literature on the nineteenth–century interior, which has burgeoned in recent years, is predominantly focused on upper– and middle–class homes. This stems, perhaps, from an assumption that the working classes were too poor to make interesting choices in their domestic furnishings. I would like to bring in a brief consideration of working–class experience. It seems short-sighted not to extend the issue of surface to the working–class context, especially as there is evidence to support such an analysis, which promises distinctive insights.

Working–class wives and mothers, like their middle–class counterparts, faced pressure to keep the domestic labours of cleanliness and maintenance invisible: there is evidence from autobiographical sources and the accounts of social investigators that husbands and fathers expected domestic work to conform to a timetable that would not disturb their mealtimes or leisure.[[8]](#footnote-8) Women of the working classes often lived extremely restricted lives, bounded by the home and its immediate environment, and with little scope for leisure or individualistic self–expression. Yet domestic tasks of cleanliness and maintenance, while an instrument of that restriction, also provided an opportunity for the material demonstration of values such as respectability and pride. Eileen Baillie, a clergyman’s daughter who grew up in a poor community in the East End of London, described the home of a railway worker’s family that she visited regularly:

It was the most ordinary house in an ordinary side–street ... but you could tell at once what sort of people lived there, for the front door was neatly painted and the doorstep well scrubbed and “stoned.” Once inside you were conscious of spotless cleanliness, despite the smallness of the rooms and the worn condition of much of the furniture. Nanny used to say that we could eat our dinners off the floor ... (138–9).

Here, despite the absence of new and status laden objects, despite the “worn” furniture, there is nevertheless a suggestion of almost ostentatious display in the extreme cleanliness and the attention to polish (the doorstep was not just scrubbed but also “stoned,” i.e., coated with whitening). Social pressure to achieve such display was no doubt onerous, but there are instances of working–class women who record some satisfaction gained through the achievement of carefully or even enthusiastically scrubbed or polished surfaces, as will be discussed later.

**Surface Delight**

*Antiques*

Earlier we considered the anxiety that new and poor quality furniture and furnishings provoked in design reformers, anxiety that was particularly focused on surface qualities—the excessive polish of slick and sticky varnish, the supposed tastelessness and dishonesty of cheap veneers and imitative surface effects. The adjectives used in these critiques were expressive; however we might oppose to them another set of descriptive terms, from the same writers, but describing the surface qualities of a very different class of objects. Mrs. Orrinsmith, for instance, who despised the “tawdry garishness” of conventional taste (see above), gives the following description of the sort of fireplace she recommends for a comfortable and tasteful room: “by the side of the brazen fender stands an elderly coal–scuttle of gleaming copper, whose rich red glow loses nothing by its juxtaposition to the golden brass of the fender” (38). Again the adjectives stress surface qualities, but here the objects described are antiques, and the surfaces are depicted as richly patinated rather than vulgarly glossy. The vogue for furnishing with antiques was new in the 1870s, and, as Margaret Ponsonby notes, it was partly a strategy to counter the effects of too much newness amongst the possessions of the recently wealthy. In the literature produced by Edis, Orrinsmith and the Garretts, which was influenced by design reform, the appreciation of antiques appears to have been a direct response to the perceived inadequacies of contemporary furniture and furnishings, and particularly their lack of surface integrity. Edis contrasts past styles to the sham of modern, imitative products:

If we examine any of the best work of past ages, either in textile fabrics, furniture, or decoration, we shall see that truth and fitness in design and construction, and harmony in colour and arrangement, are carefully carried out; that there is no sham or imitation, but, so far as practicable, the work is essentially real and true. (Decoration and Furniture 21–22)

Peter Thornton documents the rise of the fashion for antiques that went with the Queen Anne style of the 1870s, with its “stress on informality, its love of irregularity and asymmetrical arrangements” (311–12). This was in contrast to the emphasis on new and glossy surfaces that had symbolized status in previous decades: “in a modern house everything had to look smart, un–worn and un–faded. Tattered covers, signs of repair and patina were not at all desirable in such surroundings” (311–12). But antiques expressed an altogether different aesthetic that was less to do with newness and the brash demonstration of purchasing power, and more to do with a nostalgic indulgence in the comfortable properties of old things, a strategy that has recurred in many periods since. If antique furniture was desirable for the way in which its surfaces had aged, then new goods could also be judged on the way they might age in the future. Mrs. Orrinsmith praised the dignified acquisition of patina as a desirable quality in new furnishings: “oak only requires age and polish to acquire golden–brown colour” (54), a surface effect that was, presumably, considered to be consistent with hygiene.

Edis, Orrinsmith and the Garretts’ condemnation of imitative surface effects and excessive gloss and polish suggests anxiety: their praise of antiques and new furnishings with the capacity to acquire a pleasing patina suggest the delights of surface, the positive enjoyment that the deployment of attractive surface finishes could bring. Similarly, the process of maintaining such surfaces, while an anxious one because it demanded constant work and unrelenting routine, and brought with it the frustration of a task that could never be done once and for all, also offered the possibility of delight. Here again we can turn to evidence of working–class experience. The memoir of Elizabeth Bryson, who grew up in Scotland in the late nineteenth century, records the satisfaction she derived from cleaning the stone stair up to the door of her tenement home: “the real fun in washing a stair is doing it better than anyone has ever done it before—doing it so well that you have to stop to admire the cleanness of each step as you do it” (32).

And even working–class women who worked as servants in other people’s homes sometimes recorded the pleasure they could take in surface maintenance (though they record many frustrations, injustices and tyrannies too). This is Jean Rennie, maid in a large Scottish house, and responsible for polishing the gun–room floor every day: “it was always very muddy and the floor had to be polished every morning. I didn’t mind that, because I could see results, and I used to polish until the wood felt shiny and soft to my cloth. And it looked so good and smelled so rich after it was done” (qtd. in Burnett 244). What follows will discuss surface delight in more detail, with particular reference to the shiny, polished object: in doing so it will examine further the varying approaches taken by people of different social class to surface and its maintenance. *Shine, polish, class, taste*

As has been noted, the working–class home has received relatively little attention from historians of material culture. Yet social investigator Maud Pember Reeves, writing in 1913, described the home of a working–class woman in London who decorated her front windowsill with “a row of red and yellow cocoa tins to make a bright effect” (6), and it doesn’t seem immediately obvious why the cocoa tins shouldn’t be just as interesting as any of the many objects used to decorate the drawing rooms of the comfortable middle classes. Within the academic field of aesthetics, Thomas Leddy has analyzed the appeal of what he calls “everyday surface qualities” and the attractions of “sparkle and shine,” surface effects that may be valued in certain contexts, yet condemned as “glitzy” or “gaudy” in others (“Everyday Surface Aesthetic Qualities 259–68; “Sparkle and Shine” 259–73). He cites the contemporary Mexican and Chicano *rasquache* style, which makes use of found objects and materials to produce decorative surface effects characterised by sparkle and shine: “in the realm of taste, to be *rasquache* is to be unfettered and unrestrained, to favor the elaborate over the simple, the flamboyant over the severe. Bright colors (*chillantes*) are preferred to somber, high intensity to low, the shimmering and sparkling over the muted and subdued” (“Sparkle and Shine” 260). Is it too much of a leap to identify the red and yellow cocoa tins described by Maud Pember Reeves as a small–scale flowering of something akin to *rasquachismo* in early twentieth–century London? I would argue that there is evidence, in both autobiographical accounts and in the descriptions of social investigators and observers such as Reeves, of a distinct working–class aesthetic that had an interesting and particular relationship to surface qualities. We have seen already how the shine and polish of maintenance were valued within some sections of the working–class community, allowing the material demonstration of social values by people who could not often purchase new things, and who therefore had to make the best display they could through the conspicuous upkeep of the things they had. This was not a universal trait, and certainly many descriptions of working–class homes stress greyness, grime and monotony, shabbiness at the least, filth and squalor in extreme cases. Nevertheless, I suggest that certain surface qualities achieved by maintenance were important, and that in the purchase of new goods there was also a delight in shiny and showy objects.

Many accounts of life in the poorer districts of London in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries include descriptions of the market streets that served each locality. These descriptions often describe the market in darkness (the peak shopping time was Saturday evening), lit by the flickering light of naphtha flares that picked out the bright colors and glossy surfaces of the heaped–up goods, from shiny fruit to furniture and decorative items for the home. The autobiography of Eileen Baillie includes one such description, of Chrisp Street in the East End:

Pyramids of oranges, and russet apples polished to a startling degree – by spitting on them, we always understood – made patches of brilliant, warming colour on the fruit–stalls ... There were bales of shoddy materials in the vivid shades so dear to East End hearts—blue, violet, magenta, carmine; and gaudy oleographs, both sacred and profane ...

Over the hardware stalls the brightest lights of all were reflected on the shining tin pots and pans, the cheap white china, the coloured and gilded vases set out so temptingly to divert a shilling or two from the housewife’s purse. Indeed, you could furnish a home in Chrisp Street, for whole suites of rough deal furniture ... stood about on the pavement, together with rolls of carpet and shiny, beflowered oilcloth. (47–51)

Helen Bosanquet, an early social worker who wrote many accounts of her work in the East End of London, also described the market streets and the goods on sale there. She too emphasised the concurrence of poor quality and showy surface, in all sorts of goods: “something cheap and ‘stylish’ is what they aim at, and what is therefore provided” (130). She uses women’s boots as an example: “the boots which sell here are cheap and showy goods, with pointed toes, high heels, and much adornment of stitching and glaze; they cost from five to ten shillings a pair, and are worn out in as many weeks” (130). Caution demands scepticism in the face of such accounts. Did the working classes really buy such cheap and showy goods, superficial in their attractions, lacking “depth” and quality? Or is Mrs. Bosanquet’s description exaggerated in order to provide support for a social and political analysis of working–class “character” which problematized it on the grounds of lack of foresight, of economic prudence, of commitment in family relationships and skill in consumption—in other words, on the grounds of a number of characteristics that might be associated with superficiality and shallow fecklessness? (Remember how Miller described criticisms of the “superficiality” of Trinidadian fashion?) I would argue that solid enough evidence exists of a taste for showy shiny goods, which functioned alongside techniques of maintenance that also emphasized the delights of the shiny, polished surface. The parallel with *rasquachismo*, as well as with Miller’s Trinidadian case study, supports the validity of this aesthetic, which may be particularly meaningful in relatively poor communities where the social identity of women is expressed chiefly through family relations and the material objects that support them.

My final point here is that cheap yet showy goods did not patinate well—they did not age gracefully under the influence of simple hygiene–oriented cleaning techniques (Foakes 30). Thus the wealthy taste for elegantly worn antique goods made no sense in a community in which objects that showed their age did so in ways that undermined their value. Shoddy goods required skillful, assiduous and quite delicate maintenance that respected their rather fragile surfaces and kept them looking *new*, rather than attractively faded. It is perhaps not coincidental that the 1880s saw the advent of numerous branded polishes and cleansers, many of which seem to have sold particularly well to working–class consumers.[[9]](#footnote-9)

\*\*\*

This has been a brief foray into a large and complex subject, and one that invites further historical and theoretical analysis. In conclusion of this initial survey, I return to the museum object. The former British Art and Design Galleries of the Victoria and Albert Museum contained an eighteenth–century period room that I always found very surprising. Robert Adam’s Glass Drawing Room from Northumberland House in 1770s London was dominated by walls panelled in glass, backed with a layer of intensely glittery ruby–red foil fragments (an improbable effect in an interior of this date, and to the lay eye more reminiscent of the casino than the drawing room). This very particular surface was barely acknowledged, let alone explained, in the accompanying museum label. Between 1998 and 2001 these galleries were redeveloped and transformed into the widely–praised British Galleries,[[10]](#footnote-10) and a section of the room was reinstalled in this new setting (Victoria and Albert Museum Room 118). In this context it is supported both with written interpretation that discusses the foil–backed glass panels, and with a model of the complete room lit by candlelight that effectively evokes the impact of such a decorative scheme in contemporary lighting, rendering it much more intelligible.

Similar consideration of other, less dramatic, surface qualities might add to our understanding of the physical, aesthetic, social or symbolic properties of many other objects within these galleries. And what about process, the hard (but potentially rewarding) labor of maintenance? Some museums, mostly those that focus on the everyday life of ordinary people, do let us into such process. However, as Tony Bennett has noted, using the open air museum at Beamish in Country Durham, UK as an example, these museums sometimes sentimentalise their subject and in doing so risk offering somewhat parodied versions of everyday activities, demonstrated through replica objects and re–enactments that are a hybrid of the past and of a present–day mythology of the past (110–114). Thus I conclude with a question: how can museums of the decorative arts document in a scholarly manner both surface effects and surface processes, and thus enhance our understanding of historical objects and the people who owned, used and cared for them?

1. A good introduction to such sources can be gained from reading articles, reviews and particularly editorials in the *Journal of Design History* (see for instance Lees–Maffei, “Studying Advice”; Lees–Maffei, “Introduction”; Aynsley and Berry). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This paper deals with domestic interiors and objects: for a related analysis of textile surfaces (clothing and portable household textiles) see Kelley, “The Interpretation of Surface.” For a collection of essays that deals with surfaces in design and material culture more generally, see Adamson and Kelley. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jules Lubbock’s *The Tyranny of Taste* gives a detailed and lively, if perhaps over-polemical, account of mid-nineteenth-century design reform. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See also Edwards 33, 76 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For more on patina, see McCracken 37–43. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For more on challenges to the Victorian notion of “separate spheres,” see Vickery. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For more on these urban arrangements, see Hermann Muthesius’s The English House and Stefan Muthesius’s The English Terraced House. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See for instance Reeves 88; Loane 42 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. see Bell 55–67; Kelley, Soap and Water 65–66 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For discussion of the new galleries, see Bryant, and Wilk and Humphrey. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)