Consumers' Imperium

The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865–1920
Kristin L. Hoganson

The University of North Carolina Press
Chapel Hill
Contents

Acknowledgments xi
Beyond Main Street: Imperial Nightmares and
Gopher Prairie Yearnings 1

1 Cosmopolitan Domesticity, Imperial Accessories:
Importing the American Dream 15

2 The Fashionable World:
Imagined Communities of Dress 57

3 Entertaining Difference:
Popular Geography in Various Guises 105

4 Girdling the Globe: The Fictive Travel Movement
and the Rise of the Tourist Mentality 155

5 Immigrant Gifts, American Appropriations:
Progressive Era Pluralism as Imperialist Nostalgia 209

Conclusion:
The Global Production of American Domesticity 251

Appendix of Travel Clubs 257
Notes 279
Bibliography 347
Index 369
will end with an appreciation of their differences from books. True, books
don't have sticky fingers and they don'tsnippet each other in fits of rage or
go tearing around hollering at the top of their lungs, but neither do they
laugh, play, smuggle, or fabricate things out of boxes and junk. For all that,
and more, I would like to thank Jerry, Annette, and Edie Frances. I realize
that you would prefer something more accessible, but this book, like your
mother, is dedicated to you.

Beyond Main Street

Imperial Nightmares and Gopher
Prairie Yearnings

A decade before his icy death aboard the Titanic, the English
journalist W. T. Stead grappled with destiny in a book titled The American-
ization of the World. As the title suggests, Stead painted a picture of growing
U.S. assertion. He covered topics ranging from the expanding population
of the United States to its support for overseas missionaries, commercial
power, and military prowess (demonstrated in its 1898 war against Spain).
Even the mighty British Empire could not withstand the onslaught—the
U.S. heiresses who had triumphed in the aristocratic marriage market were
just the tip of a far larger iceberg. Stead invoked some "prophetic pictures"
from Lili magazine to convey the magnitude of the challenge Americaniza-
tion posed to British customs and institutions. Underneath a photograph
of Parliament, the American publication had placed the inscription: "The
residence of Mr. John B. Grabh, of Chicago."

According to Stead, the inexorable Americanization of the world pre-
sented Great Britain with a momentous choice: to join in or be left behind.
If the British Empire—the world's leading power with a colonial presence
on six continents and numerous small islands in the Caribbean, Pacific, and
elsewhere—did not merge with the United States, it would be displaced by
it. Stead insisted that he faced the possibility of an English-speaking federa-

In the interest of readability, I use "American" instead of "U.S." throughout the text
when the context makes it clear that I am referring to the United States and not all of
North and South America.

xiv Acknowledgments
tion with "joyful confidence" rather than a "spirit of despair." "The Briton, instead of clashing against this inevitable supersession, should cheerfully acquiesce in the decree of Destiny, and stand in betimes with the conquering American." But Stead's protestations that American ascendance did not necessarily mean the end of the world revealed just how deep anxieties ran.

Indeed, Stead began his account by admitting that many of his countrymen resented "Americanisation." He went on to say that "the American invasion has somewhat scared Europeans... When Prince Albert of Belgium returned from his American trip in 1858 he was said to have exclaimed to an American friend: 'Alas! You Americans will eat us all up.'"

As Stead well knew, many Europeans regarded the prospect of being ingested by the United States as the stuff of nightmares. Such apprehensions found expression in tracts like "The American Invasion," "Die Amerikanische Gefahr" (The American Danger), and Le peril americain (The American Peril). Stead's countryman F. A. McKenzie captured many of the anxieties surrounding Americanization in The American Invaders. McKenzie characterized U.S. commercial might in military terms, claiming that "America has invaded Europe not with armed men, but with manufactured products." The extent to which American exports had transformed domestic life could be seen by following an Englishman through his day: "The average citizen wakes in the morning at the sound of an American alarm clock; rises from his New England sheets, and shaves with his New York soap, and a Yankee safety razor. He pulls on a pair of Boston boots over his socks from West Carolina, fastens his Connecticut braces, slips his Waterbury watch into his pocket and sits down to breakfast. Then he congratulates his wife on her way Illinois straight-front corset sets off her Massachusetts blouse, and begins to tackle his breakfast, at which he eats bread made from prairie flour...tinned oysters from Baltimore, and a little Kansas City bacon." And so on. In McKenzie's account, the United States comes across as an expansive empire, its advance troops may have been commercial agents; and its occupying forces, manufactured goods; but it was an empire nonetheless. Sixty-some years before critics coined the term "cultural imperialism," McKenzie accused the United States of practicing it.

Later historians have echoed such assessments of the United States as a commercially and culturally expansionist nation at the turn of the twentieth century. Their tendency to interpret this period through the Americanization of the world framework can be seen in book titles such as America's Outward Thrust, Peacefully Working to Conquer the World, Spreading the American Dream, Exporting Entertainment, and Drive to Hegemony. This interest in

the "outward thrust" of the United States originated with foreign-relations historians, who have found plenty of evidence of empire in U.S. military interventions in Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Guam, Panama, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, China, and elsewhere. But internationally minded historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era have not stopped with U.S. occupations and political control. They also have turned their attention to the informal empire resulting from U.S. business expansion, philanthropic and missionary endeavors, and the export of popular culture, via such means as minstrel shows, Buffalo Bill spectacles, and Hollywood movies.

The narrative of U.S. expansion at the turn of the twentieth century serves the useful function of setting up later instances of Americanization. Historians writing on the United States in global context after World War I have emphasized its expanding reach and influence. From military might to jazz, from economic clout to rock 'n' roll, the story of the twentieth-century United States is the story of the elephant in the world parlor. Especially in the period following World War II, the United States filled the room. Nobody could take their eyes off it, and everybody stared warily around to avoid being crushed. Even the growing interest in globalisation has not displaced the Americanisation of the world paradigm, as seen in accounts that give globalization an American face.

What makes this face all the more American is the sense that the United States has stood fairly aloof from global currents. A number of historical accounts have suggested that in contrast to the rest of the world, which could not ignore the American colossus (nor, in many cases, more proximate powers), the United States could choose to look inward. Suffering from an acute Cold on the Hill complex, the United States refused to welcome the foreign, or so run the narratives stressing American exceptionalism. To the extent that Americans looked outward, they did so largely with ambitions of transforming the world, not of transforming themselves. Even as the United States instilled fears of being gobbled up, Americans continued to prefer Kansas beef and home-grown potatoes to Belgian chocolate.

Of course, historians have recognized that the United States was never completely isolated from foreign cultural production and influence. Karen Ordahl Kupperman has noted that, as a product of transatlantic colonial encounters, the United States was international before it became national. Even after independence led to greater calls for national self-assertion, many Americans continued to venerate European high culture. Wealthy Americans departed on grand tours, ordinary people flocked to Shakespeare performances, and French films dominated the American market prior to 1910. Orientalism also made a mark on U.S. culture, as seen for example in
chimisterie, the Egyptian revival, an interest in Buddhism, amusement parkley dances, and the fin-de-sicle Japan craze. Black nationalists looked to Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia as sources of culture. Progressive Era reformers took inspiration from European social politics. But fascination with foreign cultural production has played a minor role in histories of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United States. Domestically produced mass culture and commercial amusements have occupied center stage.

The greatest exception to the narrative of turn-of-the-twentieth-century cultural aloofness can be found in the voluminous literature on immigration. Yet, until recently, these histories have focused on the assimilation of immigrants into American ways. Furthermore, historians have underscored the hostility that greeted many immigrants. As Matthew Frye Jacobson has written, "strains of xenophobia would become increasingly important in American civic life in the years between 1876 and World War I, as the successful export of American goods to all the world's peoples' would also entail a massive import of the world's peoples." Indeed, historians have shown how the antipathy toward immigrants, particularly those from outside of Europe, resulted in the passage of immigration restriction measures such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the 1924 Immigration Restriction Act.

Besides stressing efforts to maintain a narrowly understood national culture by changing immigrants or keeping them out, historians have marveled the history of immigration in behalf of the Americanization-of-the-world argument. U.S. commercial expansion, they have argued, owed a huge debt to immigrant workers. Furthermore, historians writing on the many labor migrants who returned to their homelands have emphasized the American ways they brought back to their villages. The massive human influx into the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has failed to shake historians' conviction that the United States was a predominantly exporting nation. To the extent that immigration was an exception, it was the exception that proved the rule.

Rather than stressing integration into the world, historians have tended to tell the history of the United States from the end of the Civil War through World War I as a story of national integration that enabled imperial expansion. This narrative emphasis fits with their coverage of other periods. According to Eric Foner, "Historians are fully aware of how American military might, commodities, and culture have affected the rest of the world, especially in the twentieth century. We know how the United States has exported everything from Coca-Cola to ideas about democracy and free enterprise." Far less attention has been devoted to how our history has been affected from abroad. To elaborate on Foner's point, we know more about tariffs than the goods that made it past them; more about the destruction of the tropical rain forest than the marketing of mahogany; more about the export of Singer sewing machines than about imported silk; more about the United Fruit Company in the Caribbean than about the consumption of bananas; more about the exercise of U.S. military power than how that power affected daily life and consciousness in the United States; more about efforts to Americanize immigrants than to preserve their cultural traditions. That is, we know more about the outgoing tide than the incoming swell. Much of our understanding of the United States in the world in this period combines W. T. Stead's emphasis on U.S. expansion with a characterization of American culture straight from Sinclair Lewis's Main Street.

Lewis published this novel in 1920, following a horrific war that left a wide swath of Europe in ruins. Though ostensibly about the fictitious town of Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, Lewis intended his novel as a commentary on small-town American life in general. "Its Main Street is the continuation of Main Streets everywhere. The story would be the same in Ohio or Montana, in Kansas or Kentucky or Illinois, and not very differently would it be told up York State or in the Carolina hills." Rather than looking out, Main Street looked in. The residents led dull, unremarkable lives, marked by a smug sense of superiority. As Lewis ironically commented, "Main Street is the climax of civilization. That this Ford car might stand in front of the Bon Ton Store, Hannibal invaded Roone and Brunnau wrote in Oxford cloisters. What Ole Jenser the grocer says to Ezra Steeboady the banker is the new law for London, Prague, and the unprofitable idea of the sea; whatever Ezra does not know and sanction, that thing is hence, worthless for knowing and wicked to consider." The sturdy farmers of Gopher Prairie might have had hundreds of years of European culture behind them, but for naught: their intellectual lives revolved around gossip and trivial daily matters; they manifested little curiosity about the wider world. Even in the middle of the Great War, the people of Main Street yawned and said the conflict was none of their business. For the stalwart local boosters and nationalists of Gopher Prairie, the good life meant a day at the lake. Main Street symbolized American provincialism.

This does not mean that the denizens of Gopher Prairie were utterly isolated, of course. Not only did the farmers in the surrounding countryside export their grain to the far corners of the earth, but they also had culturally expansive ambitions. Lewis casts the provincialism of Gopher Prairie as slightly dangerous for precisely this reason: "A village in a country which is
recipes for curry, voyages to the Solomon Isles. Once she even thought she might give up her work as a librarian and "turn a prairie town into Georgian houses and Japanese bungalows." Her friends liked to have her over because she could be depended upon to appreciate the Caruso phonograph record and the Chinese lantern from San Francisco. Yet for all of her fantasies, Carol wore sensible shoes. "Never did she feel that she was living."  

Then she married Dr. Will Kennicott and moved to Gopher Prairie, where she tried to cast herself as a counter to small-town insularity. She confessed to prefer café-parfait to beefsteak. She hired a Swedish maid, Bea, who served visitors from a Japanese tea set. For her first party, Carol turned her front and back parlors into an Orientalist spectacle, with a Japanese obi, a davenport, and a vermillion print. She commanded her guests to don Chinese masquerade costumes from an import shop in Minneapolis. "Please forget that you are Minnesotans, and turn into mandarins and emperors and — and samurai (isn't it?), and anything else you can think of." Carol stunned her guests by appearing in trousers and a coat of green brocade edged with gold, her black hair pierced with jade pins, a languid peacock fan in her hand. She led the assemblage in a "Chinese" concert and then served "blue bowls of cheese morn and Lichaa nuts and ginger preserved in syrup."  

Carol is noteworthy not only for her struggle against the village virus that turned her neighbors' gazes inward but also for her enthusiasm for the exotic. Unlike many of her neighbors, she regarded the foreign with more appreciation than disdain. When her women's club covered Scandinavian, Russian, and Polish literature, one member condemned the "sinful paganism of the Russian so-called church." But Carol, ever in search of the picturesque and romantic, took pleasure in the Norwegian Bibles, dried cod for Ludlif, and Scandinavian farmwives in a local store. She reveled in the "mild foreignness" of a Norwegian Fair at the Lutheran church. Whereas her friend Vida suggested presenting the high school with a fall set of标准's travel lectures because of their educational value, Carol saw the rest of the world as a means to pleasure. A visiting Chaussuque series made her fantasize about Syrian caravans. She dreamed of Venice, Buenos Aires, Brussels, and Tang-tao. In contrast to Vida, who remarks, "I imagine gondolas are kind of nice to ride in, but we've got better bath-rooms!" Carol desires "startling, exotic things." She longs to be "a part of vast affairs, not confined to Main Street and a kitchen but linked with Paris, Bangkok, Madrid." She professes solidarity with the "Negro race and the Asiatic colonies" and finds happiness in a Chinese restaurant in Minneapolis that made her feel "altogether cosmopolitan."
Looking back over the previous decades, Lewis tapped into a tension between small-town insularity and yearnings for connection to the wider world. His characterizations of Gopher Prairie do not refute Stead’s depiction of the Americanizing juggernaut, but they complicate it. Through Carol, Lewis tells the other side of Stead’s story: even as the United States gained a formal empire of direct political control and an informal empire of commercial and cultural influence, it was not impervious to the offerings of the rest of the world. Carol represents an intense desire to connect with larger currents. History is a matter of perspective as well as fact, and Lewis reminds us that the matter of Americanization might look somewhat different from home.

This book tells the story of the United States in the world at the turn of the twentieth century from a domestic perspective. It looks at quintessentially domestic places—middle-class American households—to find evidence of international connections. Rather than treat these households as thoroughly domestic, it treats them as contact zones. Appreciating the extent to which real homes served as places of encounter can help us reconsider the idea of the United States as home. Thus, this book explores the foreign inflections of “home” in both senses of the word: households in particular and the nation more broadly.

Recognizing that homes did not decorate themselves or invite their friends over for Orientalist teas, this book is also about the women charged with producing U.S. domesticity. These women did more than dumbly respond to prescriptive literature and the marketplace; they asserted agency through their shopping, decorating, and dining preferences and their choices of leisure and reform activities. I do not write about all American women, however. I focus on native-born, white, middle-class to wealthy women. These women were less likely to work outside their homes than American women in general and more likely to have the financial resources to lavish large sums on their houses, wardrobes, and entertainments. They were more likely to employ household help so they would be free to pursue leisure activities, and they were more likely to gain prominent positions as reformers, thanks to their social standing. So why do I focus on such a privileged, atypical group? Because these women served as symbols of U.S. domesticity, exercised considerable power in the marketplace, and raised many of the leaders of the American century.

I first came to appreciate the international dimensions of white, middle-class American women’s daily lives when, in the course of researching my first book, I noticed numerous references to foreign people and countries on the women’s pages of turn-of-the-century U.S. newspapers. Intrigued, I
chapter argues that fashionable women asserted their class, racial, national, and civilizational standing with an eye not on far wider contexts. It finds that their sense of entitlement had global dimensions.

The third chapter considers imported foods, foreign recipes, and entertainments such as national theme meals and around-the-world dinners. It argues that food writings and cooking served as forms of popular geography, for they conveyed ethnographic lessons. Although some of these lessons taught contempt for other peoples (who reportedly ate disgusting, barbarously prepared foods), others stressed the foreign as a source of novelty and pleasure. Guides to producing exotic entertainments, which went far beyond foods to include decorations, costumes, and music, encouraged hostesses to celebrate their standing as privileged consumers in a global marketplace by faking foreignness in their homes.

The fourth chapter, on women's arachnoid travel clubs, builds on the theme of geographic consciousness. It explains the popularity of these clubs by situating them in a larger culture of fictive travel—invoking everything from circuses to museums, travel lectures, world fairs, and church bazaars—and it discusses their role in advancing a tourist mentality, meaning a tendency to see the rest of the world as service providers.

The last chapter examines the Progressive Era immigrant gifts movement. This involved enthusiastic displays of immigrants' dances, songs, costumes, and handicrafts, in events typically directed by "old stock" Americans. Focusing on the gifts events produced by settlement house residents, Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) affiliates, playground workers, librarians, and chidwomen, this chapter argues that colorful song and dance routines advanced pluralistic conceptions of citizenship by appealing to the consumerist valuation of novelty and difference. It contends that gifts promoted cherished difference all the more because they feared that the relentless tide of Americanization was effacing it.

The various chapters may hold particular appeal for those interested in household decoration, fashion, food, travel, and folk arts. But the point of these chapters is not curtains, clothing, or cooking per se. It is what such phenomena can tell us about the United States in world context. This preeminently female, domestic, consumption-oriented approach to understanding the United States in the world stands in stark contrast to foreign relations histories emphasizing the prominently male topics of diplomacy, the military, and manufacturing. But the fundamental premise of this book is that the traditional choice of subjects has advanced the Americanization-of-the-world argument while deflecting attention from the globalization of the United States. In focusing on the outward thrust of American power, historians have overlooked the extent to which the United States should be seen as a consumers' imperialism.

What do I mean by 'consumers' imperialism'? First, this term refers to the importance of imports in shaping American domesticity. Histories of consumerism tend to be national in scope, but this book reminds us that the national pie had foreign ingredients. Even as it centers on the ingestion of that pie, this book urges us not to forget the foreign cooks who helped produce it and the foreign culinary traditions that influenced its flavor. It maintains that the much-sung American standard of living has depended on an imperial system of consumption.

While acknowledging that diplomacy, the military, and manufacturing affected consumers' abilities to buy imported goods, this book shifts our gaze from these relatively well-studied topics to the relatively unknown subjects of the imports themselves and their reception. Without rejecting the importance of policy making, military might, and economic expansion to U.S. power, it insists that consumption constituted a form of interaction with the wider world. Although in most cases consumption did not mean face-to-face encounters with foreign producers, each marketplace transaction provided a point of contact for people situated within vast webs of production, commerce, and wealth. Beyond reflecting larger relations of power, each purchase helped sustain a particular international political economy. Although this book does not pursue the ways in which consumer demand affected policy making, military engagement, and capital flows, it is of great relevance to these topics. Without the material desires of the consumers, there would have been no cause for policies, interventions, and investments aimed at gratifying consumer demand.

Given that the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a heyday of empire, purchasing imports in this period can be seen as an act of imperial buy-in. Exporters, investors, missionaries, and militarists were not the only groups with an interest in empire: countless middle-class Americans had quite a lot at stake as well. Consumers participated in the formal empire of U.S. political control, the informal empire of U.S. commercial power, and the secondhand empire of European imperialism through shopping for truffles and savories. In contrast to those who experienced imperialism as a more menacing development entailing exploitation, impoverishment, and bloodshed, the consumers in this account experienced it as a collection of goods.

In addition to referring to the material base of American domesticity, consumer's imperialism refers to an imagined realm of fantasy fulfillment. The following chapters pursue this aspect of the consumers' imperialism by

Beyond Main Street
investigating the elaborate webs of meaning spun around imported household objects, Paris fashions, foreign foods, exotic travel experiences, and immigrant performances. They find that consummated outlooks led to a self-centered kind of engagement with the rest of the world that emphasized pleasure and novelty. Regarding empire from the perspective of stockholders rather than workers made it possible to ignore the costs of production incurred by distant, unseen peoples. Insofar as consumers acknowledged a less savory side to the rising U.S. empire, it was as a reference point to remind themselves just how fortunate they were.

Whereas the first meaning of consumers' imperium alludes to a literal but often tacit process of imperial buy-in, the second treats imperial buy-in as a more figurative but also more conscious process. If the first interprets empire as a matter of material goods, the second centers on the belief that imperialism was itself a good because of its role in creating distinction. Although the women I write about exercised social, cultural, and economic power over others, they were not political leaders or, in most cases, fully enfranchised citizens. Even as they seized the opportunities that were available to them, they had grounds to doubt whether they were in control of their own destinies. This explains much of the attraction of the consumers' imperium. The pleasure of boundless consumption deflected attention from the inequalities encountered on the home front by reminding these women that, on a global scale of things, they occupied a position of privilege. The women who bought into the consumers' imperium sought not only tangible items but also a sense of empowerment.

For those interested in "big" topics like the United States in the world, this book may seem to deal in trivia: pottery, party dresses, recipes, travelogues, and paguants. But these things provide telling insights into U.S. history unappreciated by Strad and others who have stressed the Americanization of the world. By shifting attention from production to consumption, exports to imports, high politics to culture, pivotal events to daily life, and men to women, this book urges us to rethink the Americanization-of-the-world narrative. As it provides a historical grounding for the desires of the fictional Carol Kennecott and her real-life kindred spirits, it makes a case for the globalization of the United States reaching back well before the twentieth century. It maintains that empire was not just located out there, but that it had purchase at home, thanks to consumerist desires and fantasies. Ultimately, it collapses the distinction between "abroad" and "at home" by showing how they came together in the domestic realm of the consumers' imperium.

Cosmopolitan Domesticity,
Imperial Accessories
Importing the American Dream

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, middle-class Americans commonly regarded household interiors as expressions of the women who inhabited them. As the author of a 1913 decorating manual put it, "We are sure to judge a woman in whose house we find ourselves for the first time, by her surroundings. We judge her temperament, her habits, her inclinations, by the interior of her home." Motivated by that logic, American women with money to spend turned to their homes to define themselves.

One such woman, more typical in her taste than her extraordinary wealth, was Bertha Honoré Palmer. After the 1871 Chicago Fire gutted the Palmer holdings, she and her millionaire husband invented themselves anew. They first rebuilt the Palmer House, a downtown hotel. In 1883 they started on a private residence, Palmer Castle, built on landfill fronting Lake Michigan. Contemporaries described the exterior as early English battlement style. Italian craftsmen laid the mosaic in the front hall, which set off the Gobelins tapestries on the wall. From these visitors could wander into the French drawing room, the Spanish music room, the English dining room, the Moorish ballroom, and the Flemish library. Upstairs, Bertha Palmer slept in a bedroom copied from a Cairo palace. The Castle, no longer standing, was a Gilded Age spectacle, but a curious one in light of the principle of self-revelation. Given the tendency to regard domestic interiors as an expression of their occupants, what explains Bertha Palmer's efforts to stage the world in her household?
Cosmopolitan domesticity, seemingly paradoxical by definition, was at odds with some core nineteenth-century ideas about households. Tract writers commonly presented the home as a haven from the outside world. As John F. W. Ware, author of an 1856 treatise on home life declared, "A home is an enclosure, a secret, separate place, a place shut in from, guarded against, the whole world outside." Suburban homes in particular appeared as safe havens from the immigrants who swelled the cities and entered the most private sanctums of urban households in their capacities as servants. Yet urban homes also stood as bulwarks against the surging masses of city streets. Besides keeping the wider world out, homes were expected to keep middle-class women in. Ware, in full accord with many of his contemporaries, went on to pronounce the home "the peculiar sphere of woman. With the world at large she has little to do. Her influence begins, centres, and ends in her home." Even those who found this vision of the home too restrictive, arguing instead that middle-class women should reach out from their homes to reform the wider society, joined with moralists such as Ware in presenting homes as fonts of racial, ethnic, local, and national identity. The shared assumption that homes were sheltered has obscured the extent to which they were firmly embedded in an international market economy. Nineteenth-century homes were loci not only of cultural production and reproduction but also of consumption, and in the period after the Civil War, much of this consumption had international dimensions.

As the various theme rooms in Palmer’s castle suggest, cosmopolitan domesticity encompassed design choices as well as imported objects. In the late nineteenth century, U.S. decorators looked primarily to France and Britain for inspiration. Contemporaries regarded many of the Rococo styles of the Victorian period as fundamentally French, and they scrambled up empire and Louis XIV, XV, and XVI furniture, done in varying degrees of accuracy. The press paid considerable attention to French design, and imported French goods could be counted on to seem chic. "The French have the flavor and the delicate discrimination that, as a nation, young America still lacks," wrote one Francophile in the Art Interchange British styles had an equally loyal following, especially after Charles L. Eastlake published his Hints on Household Taste in 1868. By 1881 the book had come out in its sixth American edition and U.S. shops were stocked with furniture passed off as "Eastlake style." Further testimony to Britain’s influence can be seen in decorating magazines’ glowing descriptions of English country homes.

Along with French and British designs, other European styles found adherents. Among the sights found in U.S. houses were Italian, German, Dutch, Russian, Spanish, and Scandinavian theme rooms. The latter in-

Cosmopolitan Domesticity, Imperial Accessories
cluded Saz Boul's Norwegian room, the centerpiece of her colonial house in Cambridge, Massachusetts. From the red and black corner fireplace to the bread baskets and milk jugs, the room evoked the atmosphere of her late husband's Norwegian home.  

Although Europe exercised the greatest influence over U.S. decoration, not all theme rooms mimicked European dwellings. Decorators also drew on the Americas for inspiration, as seen in a "American Indian room" featuring curios from Mexico and Guatemala. "Many women of fashion have developed of late a fad for odd Oriental, South American, and Mexican belongings," noted the Atlantic Constitution in 1856. "Today no woman with a charming home considers it complete without some bits of Mexican ornament." This interest in seemingly traditional Central and South American objects intersected with the better-known enthusiasm for Native American rugs, pottery, and baskets. Whether from New Mexico or across the border, craft objects with Native American inflections appealed to Anglo purchasers.

More common than Latin American themes and objects were Eastern ones, especially during the Orientalist craze that swept the nation from the 1850s to the turn of the century. Late nineteenth-century domestic Orientalism generally entailed fanciful productions passed off as Moorish, Turkish, Chinese, Japanese, or a combination thereof. This was not for everyone. Harriet Preceott Spofford made that clear in her 1877 book on home decoration, in which she said that Oriental designs would always seem fantastic in American homes and were best suited for "the very young and gay" and for those cosmopolitan people who are able to feel at home anywhere. Despite—or what seems more likely, because of—its cosmopolitan associations, Orientalist design attracted a following among trendy homemakers. One enthusiast was Mme Theophile Prudhomme, a resident of New Orleans. She returned from a trip to the Far East entranced by what she had seen. So she created a Japanese room with screens, fans, mats, vases, and tea sets. It was so "rich in the colors and perfumes of the land of the cherry blossom" that a visiting reporter imagined herself as "indeed in Japan instead of a boudoir in far-off New Orleans." A simpler interpretation of Japanese style can be seen in a five-room California bungalow profiled in the House Beautiful. This had sliding doors, walls painted in bamboo-color, woven floor matting, and Japanese lanterns (ill. 1.4).  

Decorators who lacked the wherewithal to turn an entire room into an Orientalist spectacle could still partake of the craze by producing an Orientalist "cosy corner." These typically consisted of an upholstered divan, a profusion of cushions, a rug, a Turkish coffee table, a few decorative ob-

jects (such as screens, fans, lanterns, and pottery), and lush draperies to frame the entire ensemble. (Textiles played such an important role that a fabric company—sensing profit—published a booklet with instructions for making four different cosy corners.) Some cosy corners struck viewers as essentially Japanese or Chinese, but most looked primarily to the Middle East for inspiration. It is difficult to gauge the exact extent of their appeal, but they did spring up across the country. In 1879 a New York City couple constructed an Orientalist platform on one side of their apartment's parlor. Another New York City apartment clustered tropical plants and Eastern textiles around a corner divan (ill. 1.5). A Chicago householder added a large parasol, spears, and fans to the basic arrangement (ill. 1.3). A Houston cosy corner had a pile of inviting pillows and an inlaid Turkish chair and table. A Denver cosy corner took up the bulk of a front hall. In the cold reaches of Montana, a teenager created a modest one in her bedroom. A woman heading to Argentina to work as a schoolteacher may have tried to produce one on shipboard, judging from the comments of an English passenger: "An American girl could contrive to make a desert look homelike, with a couple of Japanese fans." Even the Good Housekeeping article that denounced cosy corners as a tasteless fad provides evidence of their popularity (ill. 1.4).  

The interest evinced by U.S. decorators in far parts of the globe differentiates the post-Civil War period from earlier eras. This is not to overlook the China trade and the enthusiasm for chinoiserie stretching back to the time when porcelain served as ballast for homeward-bound sailing ships or...
1.2. New York cozy corner, from William Martin Johnson, Inside of One Hundred Homes (1898), 44. Courtesy of the Winterthur Library: Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur, Delaware.

1.3. Chicago cozy corner, from William Martin Johnson, Inside of One Hundred Homes (1898), 54. Courtesy of the Winterthur Library: Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur, Delaware.

1.4. "This is the Bride’s Cozy Corner. Is it Cozy? No, the Corner is not Cozy. Then why is the Bride Pleased? Because it is a Fail. The Bride has not learned that Fails is poor Taste you seem.

The scattered experimentation with other “Oriental” styles before the Civil War. But Chinese imports and chinoiserie of Western manufacture had been available to a comparatively narrow segment of the population, and other non-European design traditions failed to attract more than a modicum of interest. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, by contrast, a wider section of the American public had access to non-European imports, and taste makers touted products and styles from a broader expanse of the globe.

The popularity of Orientalist designs makes Bertha Palmer’s Moorish hall and bedroom seem somewhat less extraordinary. Noved though they may have appeared to the uninitiated, they were fully in keeping with the design trends of her day. So was her mixing and matching of styles. Although some home furnishers favored a particular style, others turned their homes into virtual world tours. Like Palmer, these decorators crafted a series of nationally styled theme rooms.

Cosmopolitan Domesticity, Imperial Accessories 19
Fashionable middle-class housewives (on whose shoulders fell the brunt of decorating responsibility) could struggle to produce a theme room or two, but only with great difficulty, and an entire ensemble of them lay far beyond grasp. But there was no need to despair. Just as a casey corner could substitute for an Orientalist salon, a parlor stuffed with things from around the world could stand in for a series of national theme rooms. Late nineteenth-century design writings favored profiled dwellings that mixed German-tackards with French chairs and Persian embroideries; an Egyptian ceiling with Celtic ornaments and statues of Buddha; Moorish grillwork with a Louis XV chandelier, Swiss clocks, and a Florentine cabinet. “All nations are represented” enthused a Good Housekeeping article on a Philadelphia dining room. That such mixing was not limited to the mansions of the very wealthy can be seen in a profile of a small city apartment that combined Turkish brass, Japanese tables, a Chinese cabinet, carved gourds from Central America, a Mexican fan, a Becton vase, a Bohemian chalice, and posters from Paris and London. “Decorative art in this country is essentially eclectic, drawing from every available source,” claimed an 1880 essay.

An eclectic mixture might be easier to pull off than a series of theme rooms, but it still took money to gather the Buddhas, the fans, and the feathers. The housewife who found even an eclectic ensemble out of her grasp might have been tempted to throw her hands up in despair or fill her parlor with cattails, ferns, and ivy. But there was hope for the would-be decorator with just a modest discretionary income. Individual items, including such small decorative pieces as ceramics, fans, and pillows, could give a humdrum household a cosmopolitan aura. Only the richest of the rich could afford a series of lavish theme rooms done in various national styles, but photographs and descriptions of middle-class households from the late nineteenth century typically reveal at least a handful of objects that served as symbols of far-reaching taste.

The appeal of imports, particularly from outside Europe, seems to fly in the face of the claims that households should represent the women within them. It seems even odder given the provincialism associated with white, native-born, middle-class American women in this period. This was, after all, an era of rampant white supremacist ideas and practices, lynchings, the disfranchisement of African American voters, and the entrenchment of Jim Crow. Historians have characterized the 1870s as a decade in which native-born Americans had faith in the assimilation of newcomers, but rising xenophobia in the 1880s and 1890s led to calls for immigration restriction. Many white Americans worried about the “yellow peril,” that is, about being overrun by Asian workers so poorly paid that they would undercut American wages. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act prohibited practically all Chinese from immigrating to the United States, and in the 1908 Gentleman’s Agreement, President Theodore Roosevelt arranged to limit immigration from Japan. Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans faced hostility and discrimination; they were ineligible for naturalized citizenship and, in many cases, isolated from European Americans in Chinatowns and Japanese towns. In keeping with this anti-immigrant backlash, nativist “purity” campaigns took off in the late nineteenth century. Concerned about the moral corruption of women and children, the antivice crusader Anthony Comstock blamed foreigners and immigrants for obscenity. The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union had a Department of Purity in Literature and Art that campaigned against “Parian inferiority” and Oriental dancers at carnivals and fairs. The fin-de-siècle obsession with racial separation, immigration restriction, and purity all represent boundary-building efforts aimed at keeping difference at bay.

Along with circling the wagons, those who regarded difference as dangerous worked to make the world around them more like home. Reformers strove to “Americanize” Native Americans, immigrants, and others by teaching them their own narrow-minded visions of American domesticity. Americanizers expounded their visions of domesticity outside the United States as well. U.S. missionaries shipped household goods all the way to China so they could model their versions of home life to potential converts. Similarly, American colonizers in the Philippines strove to reproduce the homes they had left behind in order to insulate themselves from the surrounding culture and to teach what they saw as proper domesticity to the Filipinos.

Given this context of shutting up domestic boundaries and Americanizing the world, why did so many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century U.S. decorators embrace foreign theme rooms, eclecticism, and imports? Leisure travel deserves some of the credit. Although foreign tourism remained a hallmark of wealth, rising numbers of Americans ventured abroad in the late nineteenth century. “There was nothing remarkable in going to Europe,” said novelist Robert Herrick in his characterization of a wealthy Chicago woman. “One went to hear an opera, to order a few gowns, to fill out an idle vacation.” And as the unfolding story made clear, one went to shop for household goods. Bertha Palmer had some company when she toted her treasures back to Illinois.

Indeed, numerous writings aimed at would-be tourists drew attention to the shopping opportunities that awaited them at their destinations. Such…

20 Cosmopolitan Domesticity, Imperial Accessories

Cosmopolitan Domesticity, Imperial Accessories 21
writings commonly noted that tourists could purchase costly items for a small fraction of their domestic price if they traveled to the point of origin. Harper’s Weekly, for example, reported on the nominally priced pottery in Egyptian bazaars and the charming baskets to be had for a few centsimes in Martinique. The Chicago Tribune strayed even farther afield when it provided advice on the porcelain in the “Pekin” curio market. More commonly, metropolitan newspapers ran advertisements for London and Paris shops that sold Oriental carpets, Irish linnens, and other household goods. These advertisements targeted the growing number of Americans who had the means to cross the Atlantic, called the “six-day pond” by knowing travelers who had made the trip. Articles and advertisements that provided counsel on overseas shopping destinations assumed that middle-class and wealthy Americans were in a position to take full advantage of the world’s marketplaces.  

Along with pleasure-seeking tourists, the missionaries, government agents, professionals, and businessmen who made overseas trips brought back furniture and smaller decorative items. In service of the consumers’ imperium, naval officers doubled as purchasing agents: Ulysses S. and Julia Grant had a friend, Captain Daniel Ammen, order them a 355-piece Cantonese dinner service on an 1868 voyage to China.  

Globe-trotters might have been able to find the greatest bargains, but even stay-at-homes found imported wares increasingly within their grasp. After falling by more than half during the Civil War, ocean shipping rebounded in the postwar years. Although domestic manufacturers supplied the majority of household goods, an unprecedented amount of imports entered the country. According to official trade figures, U.S. imports of wool carpets rose from less than 1,000,000 in 1865 to more than 32.7 million in 1900 and 131.6 million in 1920. (This factor of fifteen increase dwarfed the factor of two increase in the consumer price index from 1865 to 1920.) As for porcelain, stone, and china ware, the United States imported roughly 12 million worth in 1865, $8.6 million in 1900, and $11.6 million in 1920. Imports of household furniture rose too—from less than $200,000 in 1865 to almost $400,000 in 1900 and $1.9 million in 1920. And these are just some of the categories of imported goods: baskets, cutlery, brass, silver, curtains, lacies, glassware, towels, linens, clocks, and so forth also entered the United States. In the late nineteenth century, middle-class and wealthy American consumers had access to products produced around the world, ranging from Argentine lamp shade covers to Aztec relics, Belgian linen, Bohemian glass, Brazilian hammocks, German cooking ware, Hungarian pitchers, Japanese battle, Norwegian pottery, Puerto Rican drawn work, Singapore malaca, and Zulu baskets. Recognizing the abundance of imported goods in American shops, the New York Tribune counseled Europe-bound tourists not to spend too much time hunting for distinctive gifts. “There are not many things, after all, to be bought in Europe which cannot be found in our own shops.” The woman who bashed the skins of various antelopes back from South Africa provided a lesson to the unsophisticated traveler as well as a testimonial to American abundance: upon her return, she reportedly discovered that she could have secured identical pelts “with less trouble and expense” in a local department store.  

Although antelope pelts and other imports could be found most readily in the department stores that were gaining a prominent role in American retailing, intrepid shoppers also found imports off the beaten retail path. Specialty shops that sold Oriental goods sprang up in a number of cities. A. A. Vantes sold everything from Russian finger bowls to Japanese dinner gongs, Egyptian bookends, and Chinese teakwood furniture in its New York emporium and Chicago branch. (Bertha Palmer purchased her Oriental goods at Vantes as well as at the Oriental Importing Company and the Japanese Trading Company.) Other cities had their own establishments. New Orleans shoppers, for example, had at least three vendors of Oriental wares: Hop Kee and Company, Wokow and Company, and Tacita Loy’s. In 1874 another New Orleans store, Shwartz and Son, had a “Grand Oriental Exhibition” featuring novelties imported for the World’sExhibition. Besides visiting Chinatown for the best selection of Oriental shops, New Yorkers could purchase household goods from cash-strapped European immigrants who peddled family heirlooms on the street. World’s fairs did more than expose tourists to design trends; they also offered shopping opportunities. The closing days of expositions offered bonanzas to bargain seekers, who snatched up samples that had once been on display.  

Outside of large cities, shoppers had fewer choices, but they nonetheless had access to a wide variety of imported and foreign-looking household products. An article in the New York Tribune, aimed at shaming city sophisticates, maintained that small towns actually sold higher-quality Oriental items. The explanation for this surprising assertion was that purchasers for large urban establishments pounced on meager goods, venerated for the American taste, leaving the more genuine items for merchants from smaller towns. Catalogs offered another way for small-town residents to purchase imported products. Vantine’s presented its catalog as an aid to those who could not “personally visit” their establishment. The John Wanamaker’s catalog had a section titled: “From the Japanese Store.” The Matsumoto-Do

22 Cosmopolitan Domesticity, Imperial Accessories
Company mailed goods direct from Tokyo for an advertised postage rate of thirteen cents a pound. In 1915 Denver had twenty-six curio shops. A New Mexico mail-order firm that sold Mexican and American Indian handicrafts attracted buyers from more than twenty different states, ranging from Alaska to New Hampshire, Alabama to Wisconsin. The thousands of pack peddlers—Syrian immigrants prominent among them—who crisscrossed the country hawked exotic bric-a-brac as well as practical supplies. Along with an increasing availability of material goods, this period was notable for rising awareness of foreign conventions of interior design. One writer attributed the sudden popularity of cozy corners to the seemingly benign phenomenon of geographic awareness: “Only within the last decade have we become sufficiently well acquainted with these same neighbors to feel at liberty to borrow from them.” Ignoring how it was that American women had managed to become acquainted with their Eastern “neighbors” and what forms this acquaintance took, this writer tried to locate cozy corners in the realm of the sentimental. But there was nonetheless something to her claims of feeling well acquainted. The middle-class public learned about decoration from a variety of sources, including paintings, photographs, museums, missionary presentations, manufacturing displays, ethnographic writings, and arts and crafts of the homelands exhibits focusing on immigrant folk arts. World’s fairs showcased foreign goods to such an extent that a visitor to the 1876 Philadelphia exposition reported feeling that he had “landed in some large Chinese bazaar” (1: 13). Just as overseas travel provided greater access to goods, it also played an important role in disseminating decorating knowledge. Tourists did more than fill their trunks with foreign treasures; they became conduits of information. They saw new styles in hotels and homes alike, and their sightseeing expeditions took them to upscale manufacturing establishments. Upon their return, they reported on what they had seen. The numerous travel accounts published in newspapers and magazines exposed wide circles of Americans to disparate styles. An Outing magazine article on Canton, “The Paris of China,” serves as an example. It reported on the silver filigree work, lacquered ware, porcelain, and sandalwood found in local shops. As for households, it took note of the shrines, ebony chairs, matings, and silken lanterns they contained. Decorating articles credited tourism with influencing domestic design when they argued that travel would inevitably lead to greater variety in furnishings. “Travel broadens the mind and makes it more hospitable to new ideas,” claimed one such article, “hence the furnishing accessories of foreign countries, with their unexpected designs and colorings, become more and more appreciated.”* The more that Ameri-
ture on decorator Virginia Brush, from New York City, mentioned that she liked the French method for salons and English style for libraries. She also excelled "marvelously" in Japanese designs. Every year she spent a few months in Europe, visiting London, Paris, and Vienna. In these cities, she collected the "newest of materials—the fashions that prevail in furniture." If familiarity with foreign styles helped decorators such as Brush promote their craft, the elegant rooms they created furthered the appeal of foreign styles.

Those who could not afford to hire a decorator could still find plenty of professional advice. There was an explosion of writing about interior decoration in the late nineteenth century, in keeping with the expansion of the popular press. The Decorator and Furnisher (aimed at both trade readers and housewives) depicted exquisite interiors starting in 1858; the House Beautiful and House and Garden followed on its heels. Women's magazines that did not specialize in decoration, including the Ladies' Home Journal, Godey's Magazine, and Good Housekeeping, offered decorating advice on occasion, as did family magazines such as Frank Leslie's and art magazines such as the Art Amateur, the Art Exchange, and Arts and Decoration. Daily newspapers addressed the subject too, especially on their women's pages, and publishers turned out handsome decorating treatises and straightforward handbooks.

In contrast to decorating guides from the mid-nineteenth century, which tended to advocate the creation of distinctly American homes, those of the post-Civil War period had wider outlooks. Purveyors of decorating advice reprinted stories from European design magazines and reported on foreign design developments, thereby widening readers' horizons. And they advocated foreign styles for American households, including those of modest means.

The role of decoration writings in making the tastes of the rich accessible to middle-class readers can be seen in their treatment of cozy corners. The Ladies Home Journal described one that could be made for ten dollars. And there were even cheaper versions. Julia Darrow Cowles—who boldly proclaimed that "Cozy corners have come to stay" in an 1898 book on household decoration—counselled the cost-conscious to stuff their pillows with millieed wool if possible, new-mown hay and pine shavings if necessary. But what to use for upholstery? Experts encouraged women with Indian shawls in vogue before the Civil War, to dig them out of their trunks and cut them up. Even a woman without a corner could put something together, as a piece on fixing one up on the back of a piano demonstrated (ill. 1.6).

Along with instructing middle-class decorators on matters of style, decoration writers taught them to be cognizant of provenance. Instead of "cur-

tains" they favored "Baghdad curtains," instead of rugs, "Oriental rugs," or even better, Turkish, Persian, Bukhara, Caucasian, and other geographically identified rugs. (This is not to say that a Bukhara rug was necessarily from Bukhara—some were just shipped from there, others were made elsewhere in Central Asia but in designs that rug dealers thought typified the Bukhara region. A Bukhara rug might even be made in the United States, after the Bukharan fashion.) Although its accuracy could be questioned, the expansive decorating literature of the postwar period made a point of identifying origins, and many of the products it featured were foreign. Agnes Bailey Grafton, author of The House Comfortable, provided the kind of purchasing advice typical of late nineteenth-century domestic writing. She counseled her discriminating readers to buy Irish and French damask, Scottish linens, English porcelain, Japanese china (the warn against the imitations from New Jersey), Turkish towels, Indian fabrics, Chinese rattans, and Turkish, Daghestani, Smyrna, and other Oriental rugs. By paying so much attention to origins, decoration experts heightened the appeal of products manufactured outside the United States.

Merchants too touted the attractions of foreign goods and styles. "Rare Specimens of Ceramic Art from All Countries," proclaimed one Atlantic Constitution advertisement. "The Cairo rug which has only lately been imported to any extent, is coarse and heavy, but it conveys an unmistakable sense of the orient," counseled a shopping guide that assumed readers would want a "sensibility of the orient" to emanate from their floors. Likewise, a catalog company that sold Mexican handicrafts assumed that consumers appreciated foreignness, for it maintained that its "erected" had "a distinctly for-
eign air."

The John Wanamaker's catalog that drew attention to the "large number of Wanamaker buyers who crossed the ocean looking for goods to stock" and the F. P. Bhungara and Company furniture advertisements that mentioned the company's offices in Bombay, Madras, Calcutta, and London also reflected the assumption that American buyers appreciated imports. Rather than downplaying its location, for fear that xenophobic consumers would shy away, a Japanese mail-order firm cast its foreignness as its greatest asset: "Things Japanese," that are peculiarly characteristic of Nippon, or as we call them, wabi (native male) can not be obtained in other countries. The original articles must be bought here." Even goods manufactured in the United States—like a suite of Boston-made bedroom furniture advertised as being made of Cuban mahogany, following English ideas, with Egyptian cloth—lured consumers with the cachet of cosmopolitanism. The bedroom suite may have been manufactured domestically, but it brought to mind connections with distant parts of the world.

Although advertisements and decoration writings sometimes stressed the cost savings offered by imports, they more frequently associated imports with quality. In an age of machine-made products, many imports seemed appealingly handmade—one-of-a-kind rather than standardized. But if decorators just wanted handmade items, they could have surrounded themselves with cross-stitch, Shaker chairs, and the like. Advertisements that stressed the desirability of having genuine foreign articles rather than merely attractive or expensive ones assumed that foreignness itself was a large part of the appeal of imports.

In keeping with this appreciation of foreignness, decoration experts urged shoppers to buy goods that expressed authentic foreign taste. Japanese goods, maintained decorating expert Harriet Prescott Spofford, appealed to Americans because they had not been "injured by European demands . . . in buying a Japanese article we are tolerant sure of getting something according to the aboriginal idea." The attractiveness of authenticity also can be seen in statements lamenting the tendency to buy Japanese goods made especially for the Western market. Decoration writers urged shoppers to buy authentically foreign objects because of the "change they impart to the mind . . . The effect is somewhat similar to that of travel, in which the strangest things have the greatest charm." Almost as important as design authenticity (or, at the least, the assumption of authenticity) was seemingly authentic display. Hence one decorating manual counseled readers to place their Oriental rugs about "in true Eastern style." The point went well beyond taking advantage of foreign artistic capacities to entice crafting a house that was not really domestic, in the national sense, at all.

Impacts had so much cachet that decorating magazines reported on high-end retailers who duped purchasers as to the provenance of their goods, "representing them as from England, France, almost any country excepting our own." Realizing the prestige of European affiliations, devious retailers spuriously claimed connections with a home office in London or Paris. "These foreign offices are often entirely imaginative," reported a supporter of domestic manufacture, who was disgusted by consumers' guilelessness and craving for European gloss. In a similar effort to capitalize on foreignness, purveyors of Oriental rugs embellished their advertisements with pictures of herded and turbaned men, camels, pyramids, and reclining Oriental women. Even the Whittall Rug Company, a Worcester, Massachusetts, firm, filled its advertisements with pictures of Arabs, camels, and palm trees in order to cash in on the desire for products that seemed exotic: "If the decorating objective was foreignness, then the more foreign the better, and non-European touches struck Euro-Americans as the more foreign of all." 59
Although decorators, design writers, and merchants certainly deserve credit for advancing domestic cosmopolitanism, to attribute its popularity solely to their influence is to downplay the choices made by countless middle-class women. To understand more fully the appeal of cosmopolitan interiors, we need to go beyond the urgings of design experts and vendors and attempt the difficult task of determining what foreign goods meant to consumers. Shopping, at once so commonplace and so ephemeral, did not result in routine record keeping of what attracted buyers to their purchases. Nor did most householders keep notes on why they decorated as they did or what effect they were trying to attain. The intentions and resonances of household interiors no doubt varied as much as the individuals who crafted them. But even without the help of voluminous shopping and decorating diaries, descriptions of household interiors and the objects they contained can help us deduce much about their meanings. And even if we recognize the multiplicity of motives behind particular decorating choices, we still can draw conclusions about larger patterns.

What did foreign interiors evoke? Householders who mixed goods from around the globe had grounds to regard their interiors as daringly artistic. Decoration magazines often raved about the mismatched contents of avant-garde studios, thus associating eclecticism with artists, actresses, and other bohemians. An expatriate American painter living in Rome lived up to the stereotype of the cosmopolitan artist: the walls of his studio were "covered with many and many a thing of beauty, every part of the earth from Norway to Japan having contributed something." Sarah Bernhardt, the famous French actress who made nine triumphant tours of the United States between 1885 and 1908, had a notably artistic studio in Paris. Indian weapons, Mexican hats, and Chilean umbrellas crafted from feathers adorned the walls. Furs of bears, beavers, and buffaloes lay strewn on the divan, along with a less inviting alligator skin. Separated from the drawing room by a curtain of beads was a little Japanese salon. Isabel Dodge Lubbock demonstrated comparable catholicism in her tastes. After keeping a palazzo in Florence, she became a prominent member of the Greenwich Village avant-garde. But at the end of World War I, she left New York for the Southwest. In Taos she built a house that mixed French sofas and Mexican chairs, Navajo rugs and Italian tables, Buddhas and Virgins. The striking mix identified her as a woman not beholden to narrow conventions, as a woman open to the artistry of the world.

Although artistic studios resembled museums and department stores in their eclectic display, they were not intended as symbols of scientific rationality or commercial values. Instead, contemporaries understood them as protest against conventionality, as expressions of a sometimes shocking open-mindedness, ease, sensuality (think of Bernhardt's divan with the pile of pelts on it), and even decadence. Instead of exhibiting a strong desire for conformity to standards of respectability, such interiors showed a powerful desire to flout these standards. These interiors conveyed not just class authority but also individual personality. There is a certain irony in expressing one's individuality through exotic goods admittedly disassociated with the self, but the householders who strove for a cosmopolitan decor aimed to express a fluid individuality, notable for its receptivity to wider currents and outside influences.

Admonished to maintain group boundaries through their sexual purity, social exclusiveness, and standards of consumption, the women who favored cosmopolitan interiors crossed racial, class, and national boundaries in their search for individual expression. Their decorative schemes revealed a desire for autonomy. Ironically, the yearnings for personal freedom can be seen most clearly in barem-like Orientalist settings. An American woman who recounted how she learned to sit on a divan illuminates the tendency to regard Orientalist design as a means of female liberation. She acquired the skill in Constantinople, at a reception given by an Armenian lady, recently emancipated and consequently able to receive mixed company. When the American woman "proceeded to seat herself," she did so "gingerly upon the very edge, with two neat little toes carefully balanced to touch the floor." At this point a Greek guest laughed and "begged permission to give a few lessons in the art of using a couch. "Sit on your foot," he commanded; "curl it comfortably under you, so. Now be seated, far back, build a wall of cushions around your shoulders, and know true happiness."

The daringness of this pose can be seen by contrasting it to an essay, "A Proper Way to Sit," published in the Ladies Home Journal. This admonished readers to seat themselves stiffly, their spines straight. The divan- sitter was well aware of prevailing rules of deportment, but she had the tenacity to puff-pout them: "Once visit the far East, and old prejudices concerning the vulgarity of sitting on your foot are promptly dissipated." With practice, she concluded, the Turkish mode of sitting was more graceful and comfortable than the proper Western way. In this account, the Oriental interior is not the locus of oppression—the American woman, after all, was recently emancipated—but of the liberation of the American woman who overcame her primitiveness, old prejudices, and aloofness by following a command to assume an Oriental posture.

Another account that illuminates the attraction of Orientalist riches for American housewives is the story of "Miss Muffin and Mr. Turk," printed in Cosmopolitan Domesticity, Imperial Accessories.
the Harv Bantiffal. "Our big stuffed armchair... is openly polygamous," asserted the anonymous author. "Why shouldn't he be? He is a Turkish chair. He typifies the Pagan attitude toward life. We cannot openly approve of him, but we can't help liking him in our heart of hearts. He is so good-natured... He is as comfortable as a summer day, as cozy as a winter evening." In the process of redecorating, the author purchased another chair, an antique of black walnut. "She was evidently a lady, for furniture, of course, has sex. She was amusingly homely, and perfectly self-satisfied with her looks;どうで without being snuffy, clean without being dainty, she reminded us of nothing so much as a dependent dowager or an upper class London land-lady, insistent on her respectability and her social rights. In fact, she was inexpressibly British, and we weren't surprised to learn that, when a young chair, she had come from England to the States." After introducing the two anthropomorphized characters, the author moved on to the dilemma: "We had planned to place Miss Middle Class Muffin next to our fat old Turk, but how would they get along together? We could imagine British respectability oozing from every pore. To relieve the reader's suspense we hasten to say that they took to each other at once, and that they get on famously. Perhaps in the depths of Miss Muffin's leisurely-woolly heart, there burns a spark of desire for a free, wild life of adventure, and probably our fat old Turk long since grew tired of perfumed, sweetmeat-eating odalisques, and he appreciates the toast-browning, slipper-warming, domestic virtues. To us, the friendship between the pair seems quite domestic."

This story of cultural mixing illustrates what American housewives saw in their Turkish acquisitions: shock value, difference, physical pleasure, and a "free, wild life of adventure." The household Turk could serve as a foil to middle-class status, respectability, passiolessness, industry, and domesticity. When uprooted from their pagan and English contexts and placed in an American household, the Turk and Muffin engendered romance. They offered an imaginative escape from the strictures that bound white, middle-class American women's lives. They promised an unbounded world of romantic self-fulfillment. They promised cosmopolitanism.

It may seem logical to associate cosmopolitan sensibilities with New Yorkers and other eastern sophisticates, with their vast emporiums and transatlantic ties, but as Palmier's example suggests, cosmopolitanism may have had a particularly urgent appeal to people who regarded themselves as being on the fringes of culture. In "Social Life in Chicago," an article aimed at establishing that the Windy City was not so backward after all, the author insisted that there were more beautiful houses in Chicago than in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. To prove this point, she insisted that the

---

The Chicago woman "travels the world over" to decorate her house. The result? "Rooms correct in every detail in the Indian, Japanese and Pompeian manner, and in the well-known French periods." A San Francisco writer made similar claims about her city in a report on a recently built mansion, modeled after the Chambord castle in France. "Nothing used in its construction is of Pacific Coast production. The marble is from Italy, the oak carvings from England, the woods from France, San Domingo and the Indies, the plate glass from Belgium, the tapestries from Germany... the furniture from Paris and New York, and New York decorators ramscaped Europe for designs and art treasures for the interior." If residents of Chicago and San Francisco felt a more pressing need to demonstrate Europeanness than New Yorkers, who could take pride in older, moneyed-class furniture, and nationally known decorators, then residents of smaller towns and rural areas may have felt the desire to display cosmopolitan sophistication more keenly still. Women who sat on their porches on stiffing small-town summer evenings, listening to the drawn-out whistles of distant trains, had depths to their cosmopolitan yearnings that city dwellers could only imagine.

Carol Kennicott, the frustrated housewife in Sinclair Lewis's Main Street, illustrates such feelings of dissatisfaction. Feeling like she is stuck in dullsville, she longs for mystery and romance, for a feeling of connectedness with the wider world. On a more prosaic level, she craves consumer choices unavailable in Gopher Prairie. When not dreaming of escaping from her conventional and predictable surroundings, she adds Orientalist touches, such as a Japanese tea set, obi panel, and a diwan to her home. "Every one in town took an interest in the refinishing," commented Lewis, but Carol eventually finds out that they did not unequivocally approve of it. On first glance at the vermillion print hanging against the Japanese obi, Julius Flickerbaugh, the attorney, gasped: "Well, I'll be switched." Later, a neighbor asks if her diwan "is too broad to be practical?" Her friend Vida informs Carol that the local housewives not only "think the broad couch and that Japanese dusky are absurd" but regard her as eccentric. (This is the same friend who later says: "I don't want to see any foreign culture suddenly forced on us.") Such criticisms stung, but they also confirmed Carol's point: unlike her neighbors, she appreciated the artistic currents of the day. She refused to be satisfied with local standards, for her frame of reference was global.

In response to those who claimed that women's appropriate sphere was the home, cosmopolitan decorators reconceptualized their homes so they encompassed the world. Their exotic interiors brought to mind men's ability to travel. Through purchasing foreign goods, homebound women...
could associate themselves with globe-trotters. As for those who actually had traveled, stuffing their households with souvenirs was a way to reify their rambling. The knickknack acquired in a foreign bazaar served not only as evidence that one had the financial means to travel but, just as importantly, that one had the freedom, inclination, and physical ability to do so. The Atlanta woman who mixed Persian silk, Spanish leather, French chinoiserie, and Venetian glass in her dining room could feel confident that her neighbors regarded her as cultured and adventurous as well as rich when her local paper noted that she had brought her china and glass back "from abroad." 16

Besides evoking overseas destinations, cosmopolitan interiors evoked public spaces within the United States. Ostensibly foreign styles appeared in, among other places, world’s fairs, amusement parks, department stores, music halls, casinos, and theaters. The Montana Club in Helena had a Turkish room. The New York Armory had Moorish rooms: Masonic temples, sometimes had Persian themes. Murray’s Restaurant, on Broadway in New York City, had Roman, Egyptian, and Gothic banquet rooms. Nearby, the Hoffman House Hotel had Oriental apartments on the first floor—one Chinese, one Indian, one Persian, one Moorish, and one Turkish. The Waldorf also had a Turkish salon, and the Palmer House Hotel in Chicago mixed Egyptian and European touches. 17 Cosy corners brought to mind public places of pleasure within the United States.

If cosmopolitan interiors can be read as protests against the constraints of women’s domesticity, they also can be read as protests against the narrowness of American domesticity. In contrast to those who regarded homes as citadels or as launching pads for Americanizing campaigns, cosmopolitan decorators evinced relatively greater receptivity to difference. They professed new allegiances, based more on taste than nationality. A 1910 Good Housekeeping article on pottery from Provence showed how wide these imagined communities of consumption could be. Italy, Egypt, Spain, and the South American republics imported the most, but the manufacturers exported their wares to "all ports of the seven seas"—to San Francisco, Petersburg, Hong Kong, and New Orleans. Devotees had supposedly "formed a cult—whether they be on Broadway, Piccadilly or the Nevsky Prospect." 18 Casserole owners could regard themselves as members of an international community of like-minded consumers. Just as the national marketplace drew late nineteenth-century Americans closer together, the international marketplace led them to imagine still wider connections.

An article in the House Beautiful went so far as to characterize good taste as inherently cosmopolitan. "A thing may be Chinese or German, Norwe-
mainly on the accomplishments of white American and European women—she proudly described it as the most cosmopolitan of the fair's displays. Despite the European emphasis of cosmopolitan domesticity, it also encompassed an appreciation of goods and styles produced outside of Europe. In an age of white supremacist thinking and practice, cosmopolitan decorators stood out for lauding the artistic attainments of people of color. Or at least they applauded those who crafted the things they coveted. Significantly, household goods made by Africans living south of the Sahara and other groups assumed to be at the very bottom of the racial hierarchy received little favorable mention in decorating columns. Cosmopolitan decorators may have prized antelope skins, but they scorned black Africans for failing to produce attractive domestic accoutrements. Yet cosmopolitan decorators' enthusiasm for Asian, Middle Eastern, and Native American items led them to challenge some racial stereotypes. The most broad-minded cosmopolitan decorators insisted that the production of desirable household goods demonstrated racial and civilizational attainments.

The Japanese in particular won favor because of their manufactures and artwork. One article praising Japanese design said the "ingenious" Japanese deserved the title "Yankees of the East." Another lauded the Japanese for their "Western quickness." In contrast to these assessments, which continued to hold up Western standards as the ideal, some praised the Japanese for the alternative they offered, for having taught people in the West "a new way to look at life; the beauty of simplification and elimination." "The Japanese way is best," asserted an article extolling Japanese simplicity. The opening of Japan to export trade revealed, as one writer put it, "how absurd were our own systems of decoration with all their barbarous mannerisms and conventionalities, compared to the simple and natural methods employed by these men of the East, whom for ages we had, in our bigoted ignorance, supposed to be little better than savages." Some of this praise reflects the condescending attitudes of people so confident in their own racial and civilizational superiority—seen as resting to a large degree on scientific and technological achievements—that they could concede the minor virtue of artistic skill to others. But decoration experts put more stock in the value of artistry than the American people at large, and their proclamations also reveal heartfelt admiration of Japanese attainments. Some fans of Japanese creations insisted that they could infuse U.S. households with positive moral values and spiritual qualities.

Rather than pursue such moments of appreciation, studies of Orientalism have tended to focus on its function of distinguishing Western people from the racial and cultural "other." Yet Oriental and European decorative schemes also provided moments of identification, however distorted by ignorance or romance, with distant peoples. This can be seen in the strange phenomenon of enacting othersness, of using exotic domestic interiors as a stage for performing difference. Robie Lowe, an Atlanta woman with an Oriental reception room, exemplifies this phenomenon. She liked to appear in it in "soft, clinging draperies and a Zouave bodice richly embroidered in gold." Her intent was picturesque, but this was a picturesqueness premised on pretending to be Algerian.

The transgressive possibilities offered by non-European theme rooms and displays can be cast into relief by looking at the boundaries cosmopolitan decorators refused to cross. White householders may have displayed a Zulu shield or basket as part of an eclectic ensemble, but they did not aim to produce a black southern African decor. It would have been unthinkable for a white woman in late nineteenth-century Atlanta to make a central African reception room so she could better pretend to be Congolese. To embrace foreign styles, to fake foreignness in American homes, meant to acknowledge that the foreign had something to offer. To be sure, it did not necessarily mean untrammeled admiration for foreign producers, but it did mean acknowledging that they had some redeeming features.

Along with presenting positive portrayals of some nonwhite (and especially Japanese) producers, design writings sometimes played a transgressive role by criticizing imperial policies. In particular, they claimed that Western influence was ruining Oriental art, "tainting it with the poison of fake ideas, and polluting it with the refuse of worn out vaticans." Despite their enthusiasm for eclecticism at home, decoration experts expressed dismay at Egyptian interiors done in French styles and Persian homes with bentwood chairs imported from Austria. Rather than associating such interiors with progress, they associated them with cultural loss. This sense of nostalgia also surfaced in complaints that Western commercialism had degraded craftsmanship and corrupted artistic production. Just as bad as the implications for aristocracy were the implications for workers: according to a House Beautiful article on Indian rugs, Western commercialism had turned the workman into "a mere living machine, a human automaton." The desire for "authentic" goods made cosmopolitan decorators reproach imperial relationships for debasing the goods and fostering a regrettable international uniformity.

Perhaps the best evidence for the transgressive dimensions to cosmopolitan domesticity can be found in the heated opposition it elicited. The singleness with which late nineteenth-century shoppers filled their households with imported objects troubled the economic nationalists who sup-

36 Cosmopolitan Domesticity, Imperial Accessories

37 Cosmopolitan Domesticity, Imperial Accessories
ported high tariffs. Tariff proponents worried that imports would undercut American industries that they would benefit distant foreign workers at the expense of their competitors. Nor did the passion for imported products make sense to cultural nationalists, who thought that American women should surround themselves with American objects to better foster patriotism and good citizenship in their children.24

Opponents of cosmopolitan domesticity regarded exotic interiors as inappropriately heterogeneous. They echoed the British and French cultural critics who maintained that taste should be national, by which they meant that it should be shared by everyone in the nation and that it should indicate specifically national sensibilities. Taste, they argued, was a marker of national progress. Calls for households decorated in a particularly American way were in keeping with calls to purge domestic servants (generally understood to be African American or foreign born) from American (understood, in this context, to mean white, middle-class, and native-born) households. They also were in keeping with efforts to persuade immigrant women to reject Victorian decor for a more "American" aesthetic. Amelia Muir Baldwin, a Boston-born interior decorator and needle tapestry designer who as an older woman taught Americanization courses to immigrants, called for racially and culturally appropriate interiors in a 1916 essay. "In our own houses we are certainly happier if we have a background which expresses something of ourselves, racially and individually... a Turkish harem, however well done from a decorative point of view, is ill adapted to the uses and ideals of domestic life in this country." She went on to object to the French style as "foreign to our genius."25

The objections to cosmopolitan interiors led some proponents of cosmopolitan domesticity to argue that their interiors were, in their very cosmopolitanism, quintessentially American. In contrast to other nations, which had evolved distinctive design styles over time, Americans, "the most conglomeration of all peoples," free from a limiting design history, were, according to the advocates of cosmopolitanism, able to pick and choose.26 "The people of the United States are not transmuted by history and tradition; they are not childishly bound by the limitation of ancient plastic forms; their imagination is not haunted by ancient models. Theirs is an entirely liberal spirit of accommodation," asserted one of the more open-minded articles published in the Decorator and Furnisher.27 According to this point of view, the appreciation of novelty was a virtue, something that distinguished Americans from more hidebound peoples, content to stick to their own design traditions. Though ostensibly foreign, eclectic interiors were really American after all.

Critics were not convinced. Implying that households should convey local and national sensibilities through their design and the objects they displayed, they bemoaned the modern drawing room for being, as one put it, "a mass of heterogeneous articles imported from all lands, instead of being an organic design." They urged householders to remove foreign influences from "the intimacies of domestic life."28 Warnings of European goods as infested with microbes and insects that they seemed "lively enough to transport themselves across the ocean, independent of any steamers," suggested that imported products endangered national purity in more ways than one.29

Domestic Orientalism came under particularly heavy fire. Alice and Bettina Jackson, authors of a book on interior decoration, captured the core of the protest in their claim that "Oriental peoples and their art are so utterly different from Occidental peoples and their art that the two are not particularly congenial when brought together... With rare exceptions Kipling was correct in saying, 'East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.'"30 Such critics argued that disdain for producers should translate into disdain for their handwork. The suspicion that Eastern goods, though perhaps fine in artistry, might bring too much of the Orient into hygienic American homes led one turn-of-the-century rug-spinner to say: "I don't want any half-ragged dirty specimens that has come out of some filthy Turk's house."31 The particularly vehement opposition to domestic Orientalism reveals that those who advocated narrowly national styles did not just want to preserve national boundaries; they felt even more strongly about preserving racial and civilizational boundaries. Those who equated Turkish houses with filthy feared that Turkish corners would degrade American homes. They feared that Orientalist interiors would make the Orient seem less objectionable.

As their denunciations of foreign influence suggest, critics of cosmopolitan domesticity called for greater nationalism in U.S. household decoration. At the most extreme, they advocated maize art, meaning corn-inspired designs (ill. 1.8). Despite some contexts to encourage the theme, maize art did not catch on. But another style with nationalistic appeal did: the colonial revival, which arose in the 1870s and became the most popular U.S. style by World War I. The simple lines and relatively sparse interiors of the colonial revival represented a rejection not only of excessive ornament and clutter but also of foreignness. In an article on American versus foreign art, the Decorator and Furnisher imagined a conversation between a colonial house and its mismatched neighbors. Said the former: "I can afford to overlook their ridiculous airs, for I alone can claim pure blood and style,
the rest are a heterogeneous mass of no one knows what, imported from every country under the sun.” Mary Logan, widow of a Union general, had similar reasons for endorsing the revival. “I am delighted to see a growing taste for the Colonial period,” she said. “It is our legitimate style. Oriental decorations harmonize with the Oriental atmosphere, and with Eastern tastes and habits of thought.” Colonial furniture stood for ethnic purity in an age of immigration, for national boundary setting and assertion in an age of international connections. Decorators who advocated colonial furniture were wont to stress the especial desirability of inherited pieces, the point of which surely did not escape the notice of those whose ancestors had been elsewhere, impoverished, or enslaved during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Along with the colonial revival style, the mission and arts-and-crafts styles gained popularity as reactions to cosmopolitanism. The mission style can be seen as a southwestern version of the colonial revival. In keeping with the concern for purity, one proponent of New Mexican furnishings praised them for their “chaste, artistic designs expressive of American genius and environment.” For their part, arts-and-crafts devotees favored designs that had evolved from local traditions and products made from local materials. They saw the movement as particularly Anglo-Saxon.

The irony of these nationalistic and racially inflected styles was, of course, their mixed antecedents. Both fans and critics of the colonial revival acknowledged that its origins were really more English than American and that it also reflected Oriental influences—the East India company had introduced lacquer, porcelain, and Chinese rugs to England in the sixteenth century, and Chippendale furniture was heavily influenced by Chinese design. As for the mission style, it stemmed from Spanish taste and traditions, which in turn had Moorish antecedents. The arts-and-crafts movement likewise had British origins and Japanese inflections. Yet however much these styles reflected outside influences, contemporaries persisted in viewing them as American. And that explains much of their appeal: they were part of a protest against the cosmopolitan ethos.

Home economists joined in this protest by pronouncing hygienic American interiors, stripped of bric-a-brac, ornate furniture, and heavy draperies, as models to the world. As Nancy Torrey has noted in The Gospel of Germ.BufferedReader, "around the turn of the century, the hygienic criticism of the American home finally began to bear fruit. Architects and home designers promoted new looks—including the colonial revival, modernist, and arts and crafts styles—that eliminated dust lines and facilitated a more bacteriologically informed cleanliness."

Ostensibly national styles seemed to be not only more hygienic but also more masculine. Despite men’s prominence as purveyors of decoration advice and as high-end interior designers, critics regarded cosmopolitan tastes as essentially feminine. Even worse, they saw cosmopolitan interiors as inappropriately feminine. Those who believed that white, middle-class, American women should maintain racial, class, national, and civilizational boundaries by modeling and expounding a narrow kind of domesticity regarded cosmopolitan preferences as an inappropriate kind of female self-assertion. Rather than staying in their sphere or extending its influence, cosmopolitan decorators admitted the world into their homes. They exhibited dangerous yearnings for liberation. They used the foreign as a backdrop for enacting their own desires. Hence critics presented colonial, mission, and arts-and-crafts designs—characterized by simplicity, solidarity, and pared-down upholstery—as manner alternatives to interiors characterized by lavish draperies, abundant adornments, and soft cushioning. Unlike cosmopolitan interiors, these relatively sparse homes left no doubt as to the occupants’ racial, class, and national allegiances.

Some of the support for plain national styles emerged from a commitment to democratic principles. Peace activist Lucia Ames Mead condemned cosmopolitan interiors because she believed they reeked of imperial power. She associated the luxurious interiors of the late nineteenth century with

Cosmopolitan Domesticity, Imperial Accessories

40

Cosmopolitan Domesticity, Imperial Accessories

41
Old World corruption and empire, as opposed to new world simplicity and republican virtue. "In the home of American citizens," she wrote, "imperial splendor is a menace to democracy." Mead was unusually outspoken in her denunciation of empire, but other critics of cosmopolitan domesticity denounced aristocratic sensibilities as inimical to American democracy. An article on the poor taste of the rich drew attention to the "droll incongruity of transplanting royal furniture to a democratic land." Such furniture was "unsuited to American life, to American thought, to American ideals." It observed that "if a house is merely an exhibition place, wherein may be gathered the remnants of European palaces, a place to house works of art and the spoils of foreign travel," then those furnished with European goods and in European styles were eminently successful. But if the house was to stand for "something in our national life," then such houses were "tank failures." Critics who rejected cosmopolitan domesticity for its aristocratic and imperial inflections were the exception rather than the rule, however. Rather than denouncing cosmopolitan interiors for being insufficiently democratic, most critics denounced them for being insufficiently patriotic. As one opponent put it: "Your true cosmopolitan is rather a colorless person. He proudly proclaims his lack of prejudice and will not bind himself with ties of race or country. And yet I think that love of country is a wisely fostered instinct." The unapologetic imitation revealed in eclectic interiors was an embarrassment for a rising power. "It is humiliating, and a national disgrace that rich Americans should build palaces and spend millions of dollars in adornment that is exclusively foreign, both in idea and execution," editorialized the Decorator and Furnisher in 1895.

Critics worried that too much mixing would undercut national boundaries rather than affirm them, that it would reduce rather than uphold racial and civilizational hierarchies. Rather than seeing cosmopolitan decorating efforts as a means to assert cultural standing, they saw them as an admission that the United States was culturally deficient. Try as they did to associate themselves with the European ruling class, cosmopolitan decorators struck their critics as akin to colonial subjects. After all, at least one French writer regarded the export of French goods as a means to "civilize barbarous peoples." Like the wealthy Latin Americans who regarded European styles as a means to prove their civilizational standing, cosmopolitan decorators within the United States showed their provinciality by looking elsewhere for guidance on how to arrange their homes. According to the most common vein of criticism, the problem with cosmopolitan decoration schemes was not that they were too imperialistic, it was that they were not imperialistic enough.

But was how cosmopolitan were cosmopolitan decorators? Were they really colorless people, devoid of ties to race or country? Hardly. Like those who favored the colonial revival, mission style, and arts-and-crafts interiors, cosmopolitan decorators expressed strong commitments to racial, national, and imperial distinctions. They just followed a different path to this end. Instead of keeping the foreign out or trying to eliminate it, cosmopolitan decorators appropriated it. Unlike those who saw the wider world as a threat, cosmopolitan decorators positioned themselves as enthusiastic beneficiaries of Western imperialism and global trade. Unlike those who wanted to remake the world in their image, cosmopolitan consumers wanted what the world had to offer. Their greater receptivity to foreign (and particularly European) cultural production did not imply a commitment to an egalitarian world order, however. Cosmopolitan decorators revered in the power of the pocketbook, the power of knowledge, and the power of social distinction.

As they walledow in the plenitude of the marketplace, cosmopolitan householders flaunted the power of their purses. A woman shopper who offered advice in the House Beautiful attested to the sense of privilege afforded by commercial forays: "The chief thought in the mind of the woman who goes to buy curtains and draperies . . . must be one of thankfulness that she lives in this particular age of the world, for never before were there so many interesting things from which to choose." She went on to mention Japanese, Persian, Scottish, and Madagascar fabrics. Shifting her attention to dishes and cutlery, she continued in awe: "From the four corners of the earth come marching long processions of tableware." The mistress of the house could "make of her dining-table, spread with appropriate wares, a part of a Dutch room, or a Spanish room, or a German room, or a Japanese or a Chinese room. Or, if she wants to make her dining room merely quaint and homely, with a bit of the Elizabethan flavor that seems always to add just the necessary touch to bungalow furnishing, she can pick and choose from the offerings of half the nations of the earth." As envious window shoppers well knew, not everybody could bring the world home. But cosmopolitan decorators could and did.

The assumption that American shoppers could buy whatever they wanted exaggerated the strength of all but the fattest pocketbooks. Nevertheless, the abundance of the U.S. marketplace did reflect financial power. Only the
rich could fill their houses with imported decorative items, and the United States, in aggregate, was rich. Decoration writings and laden shop counters taught American consumers that their nation's relative wealth put them in a position of power in the international marketplace. Decorating experts acknowledged American purchasers' economic power in descriptions of specific transactions. They recounted stories of precious Oriental rugs that had come onto the market because of the dire poverty of their original owners, who had no choice but to relinquish their treasures to Western buyers. Missionaries in Persia found opportunity even in famine: "it is wonderful how every commodity is sold for a mere song," one reported. That international exchanges were not always regarded as equal can be inferred as well from the words used to describe them. Contemporaries claimed that the markets of the East had been "ransacked" for products, that Europeans relinquished their many treasures to the "inches of Americans who came armed with the invincible dollar." They referred to foreign goods as "plunder" and "trophies of travel." "It is not unusual for a buyer to invade the dwelling of a Persian gentleman and bid for his dishes or the rugs on his floors or walls," claimed an article in House and Garden. "The wretched part of it is that he very often gets them. Persia is being stripped with all the alacrity possible." Accounts focusing on production threw the power American consumers wielded over foreign workers into particularly sharp relief. News of low foreign wages, as little as three cents a day for a Chinese laborer, might have worried American manufacturers and workers, but they provided grounds for American consumers to see themselves as fortunate. Consumers could feel even more fortunate upon reading how foreign producers toiled on their behalf. Writing in the Decorator and Furnisher, Emma Thacker Hillyard reported that women provided most of the labor in the manufacture of Oriental carpets, starting at age six or seven. This burdensome labor was "the cause of physical degeneracy of what would otherwise be a fine race of people." To make things worse, the weavers were ill-paid, subject to epidemics, and victimized by capricious officials. The source of her disconcerting assertions? Vantine's, the retail establishment (ill. 1.9). Rather than advocate social change, such acknowledgments of poverty, hard working conditions, and exploitation made the consumer feel fortunate in the existing global scheme of things.

Those who celebrated imported goods and foreign fashions luxuriated in American consumers' envious status. They saw little need to question the international distribution of wealth, although they did sometimes allude to it. "One could moralize here by the hour . . . on the distance between the price paid to the poor artisan and that to the seller," wrote Hester M. Poole, a frequent contributor to Good Housekeeping, in reference to Oriental goods. Yet Poole chose in the end not to moralize, dismissing the issue with a brisk "but that is subject to the social economist, not to the decorator," thus implying that her readers could continue to shop duty free—that is, without any sense of obligation to producers.

Although shoppers could find reports of grim working conditions, decoration writings were more likely to turn a blind eye to the upheavals caused by export-oriented production, the redistribution of wealth within and across national boundaries, and the environmental consequences of massive resource extraction. (To take one example, the American-Guatemalan Mahogany Company cut more than 16 million board feet of mahogany between 1907 and 1930. Each tree shattered numerous smaller ones as it fell; only in our day are the replacement trees coming to maturity.) Instead of elaborating on such unsavory aspects of international trade, decoration writings struck a blithier tone, more conducive to commerce. They romanticized the conditions of manufacture. Hence one account on Persian rugs described the weavers working at home in pleasant courtyards, accompanied by singing nightingales. "Here are no sweatshop methods" exclaimed a catalog of Mexican handicrafts that touted the pleasant home-based manufactur-
upont a table thus spread from so many different sources has its own story to tell of the world whence it comes, the way it was made, and the use to which it would have been put in the homes of peasant or artisan had it not journeyed to America instead."

But how was a housewife to read the objects upon her table? Shopping columns and decoration essays devoted so much attention to provenance that it seems likely that a large part of middle-class women's awareness of the wider world was associated with the goods they purchased for their households. Design writings that provided information on foreign objects in use in their original surroundings provided consumers with a sense of knowing what the rest of the world was really like, a sense made especially powerful because of its material grounding. Having seen a picture of a Moor using a prayer rug in the course of worship, a U.S. homemaker might feel that she knew more than the intended usage of her ball rug, perhaps that she also had some understanding of Islam. Having seen pictures of Cairo households, she could do more than arrange her cushions in what struck her as an authentic way; she could draw some conclusions about Egyptian family life."

These conclusions were no doubt informed by other contemporary sources of geographic information, which tended to provide classification schemes that placed the classifiers on top. Although decorating literature sometimes waxed enthusiastic about the cultural attainments of foreign artisans, articles on provenance did not always depict producers favorably. Many repeated the denigrating assessments that could be found in other forms of popular ethnology. Others struck an ambivalent note. An article that called the Arab "the greatest of decorators," "romantic and splendid-loving," also called him "the freest of fanatics . . . the most treacherous of foes." Another article that mixed admiration and disdain contrasted the Oriental, "steeped in moral degradation, but with sensitive perception of grace of line and harmony of color," with the Scot — "noble, true, generous — but whose highest art achievement has been the combining of ugly checkered squares." As this assessment of Oriental artistry suggests, the ability to produce beautiful things did not necessarily imply upstanding character. Indeed, practical-minded Americans tended to regard artistic handwork as only a minor attainment. At the turn of the century, many white Americans supported industrial education for people of color at home and in U.S. dependencies, thinking that manual work would teach discipline and work habits without challenging racial hierarchies. Much of the appreciation of handicrafts made by poor, colonized, and dark-skinned workers can be seen in consistent with this logic.

Cosmopolitan Domesticity, Imperial Accessories
By making consumers feel like geographic experts and by confirming their racial and cultural prejudices, decoration writings enhanced their sense of superiority. According to the president of the New York School of Fine and Applied Art, the more one knew, the less he limits himself to one furniture style: "the broader becomes his concept, the wider his experience and the more versatile and refined his expression." Following this reasoning, cosmopolitan consumers could consider themselves exceptionally knowledgeable. They could look down on those who exhibited local tastes as relatively ill-informed. Cazin at the rugs upon their floors, American consumers could triumphantly conclude that they knew the Orient. Contrasting themselves to the women who had been weaving carpets since the age of six, they had reason to think that this knowledge was not reciprocal.

Knowledge of foreign decoration traditions and trends decoYed the outlook of the traveler and the connoisseur. It also indicated imperial power. For imperial role played a crucial role in bringing non-European goods to Western attention. The story of Major Kettle, published in House and Garden, illustrates this point. The major, who had presumably traveled to the Orient in service of the British Empire, introduced Persian and Indian antiques to the people in the author's small town. Although the neighbors initially regarded the newcomer with suspicion, some came to appreciate his strange artworks. Among them was the author, who attributed his lifelong love of the "curious and beautiful things of the Orient" to the influence of the major.

And what were the implications of this love for Oriental objects? Knowledge did more than reflect power relations: it also helped produce them. Knowledge of the natives helped manufacturers gain markets. It helped imperial officials govern. And it helped promote expansionist ambitions. Cosmopolitan decorators embraced the idea of homes as museums because they endorsed the racial, class, national, and imperial ends that museums served. They needed to look no further than their mantelpieces and corner tables to appreciate the benefits that accrued to them as the wives and daughters of the ruling class of a powerful nation in an imperial age.

Yet, however much their homes evoked museums and department stores, cosmopolitan decorators did not really want to live in galleries or retail outlets. Neither did they want to position themselves as curators or clerks. Through their decorating choices, they strove to associate themselves with the global elite, which they understood to be primarily white, wealthy, and Western. Above all, cosmopolitan decorators wanted their homes to evoke upper-crust European dwellings. The desire to produce a European look can be seen most noticeably in ostensibly French, British, and other European theme rooms. But even eclecticism conveyed European taste. True, some accounts claimed that eclecticism was particularly American. Others proclaimed eclecticism a sign of the age, not of a particular place. In a book on her Egyptian travels, Emmeline Lott described harem rooms à la Europe along with those stacked high with pillows. Travel lecturer Burton Holmes reported finding "installation-plan" furniture in Algeria. House and Garden ran a story on Baron Sumit's three houses in Osaka, Tokyo, and Kyoto, all of which had Occidental rooms for the reception of Westerners. Those who visited the Filipino village in the 1910 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo could see such mixing for themselves: the thatched roofed huts sheltered American-made chairs, tables, and stoves.

But most decoration writings did not identify nations such as Egypt, Algeria, Japan, and the Philippines with cutting-edge eclectic tastes. To the contrary, design writings, like other geographic writings, depicted non-Western peoples as relatively traditional and local. Despite scattered efforts to cast eclecticism as a U.S. style, eclecticism signified Western, and particularly European tastes. The Art Amateur, for example, reported on a French design writer who "finds it possible to combine the most incongruous objects—a cabinet of the Italian Renaissance, surmounted by a trophy of Oriental arms and a group of grimacing Japanese masks; a Spanish console leaning against a porter of point d' Hungary; a Persian carpet on the floor."

With such writings to guide them, eclectic decorators could conclude they had far more in common with the European elite than with the Filipinos on display in Buffalo. Imperial encounters affected the decorating practices of both rulers and subject peoples, but eclectic decorators strove to identify themselves with those who seized trophies of Oriental arms rather than those who had only recently obtained cookstoves.

As this affinity with Western imperialism suggests, the desire to seem European can be seen even in the enthusiasm for Orientalist schemes. It was no coincidence that Orientalist rooms became popular in the apogee of European imperialism. In the 1870s Russia intervened in Turkey, leading to the 1878 Congress of Berlin. In that gathering, the European powers kept the Ottoman Empire politically free (regarding it as too important to be dominated by any one power) but allowed opportunities for concession hunters. This maneuver was part of a much larger, and in many cases more invasive, pattern. The British had annexed the Punjab to their Indian holdings in 1849, and they occupied Upper Burma in 1885, thereby consolidating their control over South Asia. Russia established its dominance over Central Asia in 1885, when it defeated the Tukhoms. Russia and Britain divided Persia into spheres of influence in 1888. In 1883, British troops marched
into Cairo and the French fully occupied Algeria. Admiral Perry's 1854 display of power opened up trade between Japan and the West. By 1900 the European powers, Japan, and to a lesser degree, the United States, obtained trading rights in China. In buying the Baghdi curtains, the Turkish rugs, and the Indian brass work, American shoppers positioned themselves with the grasping Western powers. This can be seen most clearly in the appeal of Oriental rooms in the 1870s and 1880s.

Oriental rooms were a cultural manifestation of imperial politics. They resulted from Western knowledge of Eastern styles (however jumbled and perverted) and Westerners' ability to obtain Eastern products. Russian conquests, for example, brought railroads that facilitated the export of rugs, previously transported on caravan routes. Imperial rule also brought the manufacture of numerous products under Western, especially British, control. In 1877 decorator Harriet Preecott Speoff acknowledged the imperial connections that brought foreign products to American households. She said that American shoppers could obtain finer goods than ever before, due to "our better acquaintance with the Eastern countries, the farther depth to which we have penetrated them." The British furniture factory that advertised the Chinese and Assyrian cloth, Moroccan leather, American birch, and Spanish mahogany that went into its products hinted at the networks of trade, linking north and south, east and west, that resulted from years of imperial expansion. So did the column in the Atlantic Constitution that identified London as "the place to buy East India things cheap." If the exotic objects that filled American households could speak, the rooms would reverberate with stories of empire.

Some of these stories—especially those on compelled labor—should have made conscientious decorates blush. One article on Oriental rugs noted that in Mirzapore, India, "the [British] Government has, by engaging as many of its convicts in the jail as soon as it could find space for [them] at carpet weaving, set the fashion for the whole neighborhood." Convicts reportedly made carpets in Bangalore and Vellore, too, including ones on order for Americans. Yet rather than condemn such prison labor, those who reported on it were more likely to cast it as an efficient means of enforcing discipline. This can be seen in the story of a Hindu workman, more skilled than Tiffany's best artisans, who worked for a mere twelve cents a day. He had a fondness for drink, which had the unfortunate result of reducing his productivity. But his clever British taskmasters had a strategy: they had him locked up for disorderly conduct whenever they wanted a job completed. The acceptance of coercive labor practices—indeed, the tendency to regard them as evidence of superior British managerial skills rather than as shocking evidence of exploitation—reveals an acceptance of the imperial power relations that made a wider range of goods available to American consumers.

These power relations were particularly visible in Orientalist smoking rooms and bachelor's apartments. The apartment of a New York banker illuminates why. An eyewitness reporter admiringly compared its Turkish room to the harem of the Pasha. Its walls were bedecked in tapastries "representing Eastern dancing girls in the most luxurious attitudes." Beside the door stood a life-size nude statue in bronze of an Odalisque. In one arm she held a tray, heaped with luscious figs, apples, oranges, and nuts. It was a sensuous room in which men could enjoy eroticized Eastern women. Such rooms provided the Western bachelor with access, if only in his imagination, to the forbidden harem. If, in its inaccessibility, the harem symbolized the limits of Western men's power to fully grasp the Orient, its duplication suggested that nothing was beyond Western men's reach.

Yet erotic reveries were not the only escapes offered by Turkish dens. The bachelors, doctors, industrialists, and merchants who retreated to their confines also surrounded themselves with the thrill of violence: many such rooms had weapons prominently displayed on the walls. The weapons might convey masculinity, but as far as Oriental men were concerned, it was acowed masculinity, for these daggers, swords, and spears had been usable to prevent the European seizure of power. The most potent masculinity inhered in their current possessors—the men who could hang them on their walls along with college banners and hunting trophies.

What about casey corners? Did the women who ruled them see them as shrines to empire? The American women who constructed Oriental casey corners had, in all likelihood, been exposed to information on Oriental products and their manufacture, and, beyond that, to ethnographic writing on the harem, whether in missionary bulletins, daily newspapers, travel accounts, or women's magazines. Those who purchased household items at world's fairs could recall their display in "the Streets of Cairo" or other supposedly ethnographic concessions. Fiction, too, provided imaginative imperial contexts for imported goods. The Garden of Allah, a 1904 novel by Robert Hichens, included elaborate descriptions of Egyptian interiors, noting everything from the colors of the rugs to the patterns on the drapes and the ashtrays on the smoking tables. And, of course, decorating literature provided information on household items as well. That exposure only intensified the mystery of casey corners' appeal, however, for evangelical and secular ethnological literature alike presented harem as virtual prisons, as symbols of women's degradation in male-dominated societies.
A decorating article that praised the "exquisite workmanship" of the embroidery pinned to the wall of an Iranian harem but then went on to mention opium smoking, a sickly baby, child marriage, superstition, jealousy between wives, and the sheltered women's utter ignorance of the world captures the tension between the admiration for Eastern products and the abhorrence of the East. If men were likely to regard the harem as the symbol of unattainable pleasures, the barrier of resistance to Western imperial surveillance and control, women were more likely to see it as a symbol of oppression.

This denigration of the harem fit into a larger pattern of condemnation for the Middle East. Just as white, middle-class Americans tended to regard East Asians as inferior, they tended to disdain the Middle East as backward. Rather than criticizing European aggression against the sultan's dominions, Americans increasingly saw Turks as oppressors of subject Christian minorities. They deplored Turkish massacres of Bulgarian Christians in 1876 and Armenians in 1894–95. They protested the slave trade, which continued to flow from inner Africa, through Tripoli, to Constantinople in the early 1870s. And they sent missionaries to the region: in the 1880s, the Ottoman Empire won the largest foreign mission site for the United States. Yet all the while, middle-class housewives were sewing cushions for sensuous Oriental niches.

Given the tendency to regard the harem as a locus of male pleasure at the cost of female oppression, and the widespread contempt for and desire to uplift "heathen" peoples, Middle Easterners supposedly among them, why did Euro-American women tolerate any hint of the harem in their parlors? Why did they attempt, through their domestic surroundings, to become "as they are?" One possibility is that they disregarded the vast majority of harem writings and latched on to the idea of the harem as a protective or delightfully exoticized space for women. Another is that they draped Turkish fabrics in their doorways to manifest a sense of sympathetic identification with oppressed harem denizens. In either case, their efforts to add Oriental touches to their households can be interpreted as an expression of their own dissatisfaction, whether with male-dominated social spaces or their own sexual repression and domestic captivity. Despite admonitions to be thankful for their privileges, these women may have felt that they still had all too much in common with women of the East. Even confident, capable, socially powerful women such as Bertha Palmer had reason to identify with women of the harem: Palmer's husband reportedly locked her in her room from time to time.

But just because the harem served as a symbol of women's oppression...
become upper-class. Like the bachelors who lounged around in Turkish smoking rooms, the women who reclined on plush divans could appreciate the power dynamics implicit in their cozy corners. Though members of the subordinate sex at home, they could claim affiliation with a dominant race, nation, and civilization. Cosy corners seem to have been private places of female repose, but they revealed a desire to enjoy the satisfactions of the ruling class in an imperial world order.

In buying foreign goods and creating foreign interiors, American women no less than American men accepted, whether knowingly or tacitly, the relations of power that brought these products to their doorsteps. Middle-class American women might never be as rich as Bertha Palmer, but they nonetheless had something in common: they could demonstrate their standing through their household acquisitions. As beneficiaries of an imperial economic and political order, they could regard their purchases as a means to demonstrate privilege. And what was the point of the nation, the point of empire, if not to preserve that privilege? Cosmopolitan interiors produced as well as reflected international relations, in the sense that wide-ranging tastes added impetus to commercial expansion. International trade depended on consumers as well as producers, and cosmopolitan American housewives proved remarkably eager to purchase imports for their parlors.

In sum, cosmopolitan decorators showed just as much interest in social distinction as their critics: they just disagreed over how best to achieve it. They may have collected some foreign handicrafts, but they did not want their homes to look too picturesque. They may have attempted to evoke the Orient in richly draped niches, but they did not identify with Asian immigrants in their communities. They may have faked tropical hardwoods, but this does not mean they recognized the full humanity of the workers who felled the trees. Their decorating preferences did not demonstrate truly universal outlooks. The issue that divided them from their detractors was not whether to be national and imperial, but how. In contrast to colonial revivalists and their allies, who placed more of an emphasis on racial and national inheritances, cosmopolitan decorators embraced novelty. In contrast to the arts-and-crafts emphasis on production, cosmopolitanism centered on consumption. Whereas those who preferred the stark beauty of the mission style and other "American" interiors chose restrained display, cosmopolitan decorators favored an air of abundance. When confronted with the foreign, cosmopolitan decorators cast their lot with engagement, but their receptivity to difference served exclusionary ends. Cosmopolitan households, no less than more narrowly nationalistic ones, reveled in U.S. commercial power and celebrated Western imperialism. Whereas inward- looking critics saw cosmopolitan domesticity as a potential threat to racial, class, national, and civilizational hierarchies, cosmopolitan decorators saw the entire world as the terrain that constituted these privileges.

Cosmopolitan domesticity did not imply a belief in the essential equality of all human beings or a profound understanding of other nations and cultures. Nor did it necessarily imply a willingness to open the nation's borders to immigrants. Those who lionized the veneration of "authentic" styles in the non-Western world thought that cosmopolitanism should be a testament to Western knowledge, openness, and modernity. Those who mixed and matched imported objects fabricated the exotic. Those who sought imputed items that had been crafted to suit their tastes or who arranged them so that they felt familiar, domesticated the wider world, denying its difference and asserting their own appropriative power. And even those who strove for authenticity furthered imperialist ends, at least according to the reasoning that commercial supremacy demanded greater understanding of potential markets.10

The cosmopolitanism of consumption, premised on unequal economic and political relations between people of various countries, was a cosmopolitanism in which American consumers only superficially and in some cases only imaginatively engaged with distant producers. And they did so as a privileged, purchasing class. Despite the nostalgia for a preimperial past evinced in some decoration writing, cosmopolitan domesticity did not spark concerted opposition to the relations of power that structured the international marketplace. Langston Hughes's later musings that mahogany grand pianos and chests of drawers were made of "wood and life, energy and death out of Africa" cast a more critical light on the origins of imported goods than turn-of-the-century white design writers ever did.11

Though inherently political, cosmopolitan domesticity was more a posture than a movement to effect change, and though it made gestures toward universalism, it remained closely intertwined with the hierarchies of its day. So why were critics so incensed? They found cosmopolitan domesticity objectionable because its advocates did not sing the praises of a distinctive and unified American culture. Instead, they suggested that one of the defining aspects of that culture was its openness and the variety that it encompassed. Notwithstanding its limitations, cosmopolitan domesticity illuminates something far more complex than the self-assertion generally thought to characterize the United States in this period. For those who embraced the cosmopolitan ethos, homes were not so much bunkers as entrepôts. Cosy corners and sundry imported objects provided a way to demonstrate a broad outlook, wide experience, and engagement with the world. Eclectic deco-
proved endeavors suggest that late nineteenth-century middle-class American culture can be characterized by more than just individualism and efforts to remake the world; it also involved a search for novelty and difference, a materially rooted geographic consciousness, and a desire to associate with powerful Europeans. Rather than serving exclusively to separate homes from the world around them, domesticity provided a locus of material and imaginative interaction. In the late nineteenth century, cosmopolitan consumers imported the American dream.

Xenophobic nationalists in the Gilded Age had plenty to worry about besides Turkish carpets and Bohemian glass. Among other things, they fretted over the wave of marriages between wealthy U.S. women and European noblemen. As one opponent wrote in a heated letter to the Chicago Tribune: "It is distressing as well as disgusting to see our beautiful, pure, and accomplished girls thus stoop and throw themselves away on such wretched scum as this bartering, conscienceless, and immoral class comprises. . . . The forte of this class is hauteur, pomp, exclusiveness, and pleasure-seeking." The critic dismissed the would-be husbands, with their titles, finery, and frivolous pursuits, as mere men of fashion, unworthy of American women. The pursuit of titled husbands struck the Chicago protestor as a national disgrace but, fortunately, one limited in scope: because the "titled fellows" were only interested in money, most of "our girls" were safe.

The outcry against transatlantic matches, sometimes sneered at as gilded prostitution, may have centered on the brides, but it was aimed at their entire class and its European allegiances. Faultfinders—including some old-money elites—used the marriages to condemn the social striving and questionable patriotism of the nouveaux riches. They censured those who sought to affiliate themselves with the European nobility for putting ambitions of social climbing above national loyalties. In so doing, they defined themselves as comparatively patriotic. Middle-class critics could sniff at