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AMERICAN FACTORY-MADE PARLOR SUITES, 1871-1901

UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE (WINTERTHUR PROGRAM)

M.A. 1982

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AMERICAN FACTORY-MADE PARLOR SUITES
1871-1901

By
Gail Lorene Dennis

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University
of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts in Early American Culture

December, 1982

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1871-1901

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PREFACE

The topic of this thesis, factory-made parlor suites, permits the examination of two phenomena: furniture produced for the American middle and working classes, and sets of furniture. Both are subjects which have been awaiting in-depth study by furniture historians and students of material culture.

What is in question is not the existence of mass-produced suites, for impressionistic information has been gathered about them. But little is known about the exact nature of parlor suites. The primary goal of this thesis has been more clearly to define parlor suites. In doing this it has also proved possible to add to our knowledge of factory-made furniture, especially in the area of style.

Certainly any scrutiny of suites is complicated by the vagaries of survival. Once parlor suites had outlived their social usefulness or become shabby or outmoded, there was little incentive to save them. And the pieces of suites were particularly vulnerable to separation. Therefore, it is surprising that any parlor suite could survive intact for close to a hundred years, but many still do exist.

Many more survive in the pages of the late nineteenth-century American furniture industry's catalogues and price lists. Marketing furniture through catalogues became widespread in the 1870s, as is evident from the surviving catalogues, and continues to this day. The illustrations and descriptions in surviving late nineteenth-century catalogues show what manufacturers offered to retailers and consumers. A larger sample of suites was available for study in catalogues and price lists than was provided by examining extant sets. Because few surviving catalogues and price lists date from before 1870, however, these sources limited the time frame of the thesis. While it appears that mass-produced parlor suites were available in the 1850s and 1860s,¹ this study begins at 1871.

Another goal of this thesis was to contribute to our understanding of late nineteenth-century American culture by looking at suites as objects which carried specific social meanings for the people who bought and used them. The archeologist, Lewis Binford, wrote:

Granted we cannot excavate a kinship terminology or a philosophy, but we can and do excavate the material items which functioned together with these more behavioral elements within the appropriate cultural sub-systems.²

For those who are, in Thomas Schlereth's phrase, "above-ground archeologists," the same holds true. Artifacts, usually the most tangible and enduring aspect of a culture,

can provide information about behavior and attitudes, the most ephemeral, long after the people who created and sustained the culture have died. The sociological theories of social interactionism and reference group behavior in particular have relevance to the study of parlor suites.

In the course of my research and writing, I have received inspiration, help, guidance, and support from many sources. My appreciation must first be expressed to Kenneth L. Ames, my advisor, especially for the example he has set in looking at "the goodies" in innovative and fresh ways. Stephanie G. Wolf deserves thanks for the time and energy she gave as an additional reader in her role as the Coordinator of the Winterthur Program.

As I searched for furniture catalogues, I was ably assisted by the staffs of the following institutions: the Winterthur Museum Library, Winterthur, Delaware; the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; the Athenaeum of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Eleutherian Mills Historical Library, Greenville, Delaware; and Special Collections at the Morris Library, University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware. I would like to single out the following staff members for special thanks: Rodris Roth and Wanda Peterson of the Division of Domestic Life at the National Museum of American History,

John Hoffman and Lorene Mayo of the Warshaw Collection of Business Americana, also at the National Museum of American History, and especially Neville Thompson, Gayle Chandler and Richard McKinstry of the Winterthur Museum Library.

The following friends and colleagues also helped in many ways: Anne Coleman, Jonathan Cox, Kathy Curran, Michael Ettema, Deborah Fillos, Wayne Gibson, Katherine G. Huffman, Nancy Restuccia, Mary Lynn Stevens and Jacqueline Zanca. Neville Thompson and Susan Mackiewicz deserve special thanks. Finally, I am very grateful for the support and encouragement of William Passero.

NOTES TO PREFACE

¹See the following examples of early catalogues: Foster & Lee, Illustrated Catalogue (New York: J. Huggins & Co., 1858); F. M. Holmes & Co., Illustrated Catalogue (Boston: J.B. Batchelder, [circa 1865]); George Knell, George Knell's Illustrated Catalogue of Upholstered Furniture (Philadelphia: Wm. Butt & Co., [circa 1865]).

²Lewis Binford, "Archeology as Anthropology," American Antiquity 28 (October 1962): 218-19.

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- 8 Lacy-style Suite. From Goldstrom Bros. & Pimes, Catalogue, 1898 (Baltimore: Kohn & Pollock, 1898), p. 22. Winterthur Museum Library 56
- 9 Revival-style Suite. From Geo. D. Williams Co., Wholesale Furniture (Chicago: n.p., 1901), p. 132. Winterthur Museum Library 56

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INTRODUCTION

The existence of cohesive societies, and the uniqueness of the individuals who make up those societies, present students of culture with a seeming paradox. Unique behavior and conformity would appear to be mutually exclusive. Sociologists, however, have observed that "one's individuality can only be realized in contrast. Individuality demands the presence of others, or society, just as society can never exist without individuals."¹ But some type of mechanism is necessary to mediate between the needs of the group and those of the group member. One possible explanation, developed by sociologists, is called the theory of social interaction. This theory suggests that the values and ideas which form the foundation of a culture actually represent a consensus of the members of the group which is a product of an on-going, give-and-take relationship between the individual and society. According to sociologist Tamotsu Shibutani, "culture is not a static entity but a continuing process; norms are creatively reaffirmed from day to day in social interaction."² These social transactions have to do with expectations, not with particular actions. There is a range of behavior, which the individual, as a

member of the culture, recognizes as acceptable and appropriate, but it does not determine his actions.

When studying cultures, Shibutani notes,

it becomes apparent that what differs are the premises underlying action. Identical situations are perceived differently because those starting out with unlike assumptions project contrasting hypotheses and are selectively responsive to different sensory cues.³

In late nineteenth-century America there were assumptions about day-to-day life which were very different from the assumptions in twentieth-century America. Using parlor suites as a test case, this paper will attempt to uncover the taken-for-granted world of the late nineteenth-century United States.

Due to the fragmentary nature of the surviving evidence, however, it would be impossible ever to comprehend that world completely. In addition, the United States in that period was not a heterogeneous society. Within what was broadly defined as American culture, such factors as geography, ethnicity, religion, education, income, and occupation, among others, influenced the formation of many different groups. Reference group theory, an extension of interactionism, addresses the particular case of pluralistic societies. Shibutani has written:

In the analysis of the behavior of men in mass societies the crucial problem is that of ascertaining how a person defines the situation, which per-

spective he uses in arriving at such a definition, and who constitutes the audience whose responses provide the necessary confirmation and support for his position.⁴

The audience or reference group consists of those people whom the individual thinks of as peers or wants to have as peers. The concept of the reference group has been further broken down into two types by Robert Merton:

The first is the 'normative type' which sets and maintains standards for the individual and the second is the 'comparison type' which provides a frame of comparison relative to which the individual evaluates himself and others.⁵

A normative-type reference group is made up of peers while a comparison-type group can be one which the individual considers socially superior or inferior. As with the individual and society, contrast between and among reference groups helps to define them. In this paper, however, the term is used to refer only to normative-type reference groups.

To further complicate any analysis of behavior, an individual is in no way limited psychologically or socially to membership in a single group:

In societies characterized by cultural pluralism each person may acquire several perspectives, for he can participate simultaneously in a number of social worlds. Because cultures are products of communication a person develops a somewhat different perspective from each communication channel to which he is regularly exposed.⁶

Only when there is a conflict between the beliefs of two reference groups in which the individual participates does

he or she become directly aware of the existence of the groups. The individual then must reconcile the differences or choose between the reference groups.

Throughout the period covered by this study, the factory-made parlor suite was one way in which members of many reference groups within the American population could express sociability, individuality, and/or wealth. To varying degrees, these attributes have been positively valued in many societies. This particular cluster of characteristics has been symbolized over and over in Western culture--for example, in ball rooms and game rooms as well as parlors. The use of parlor suites, however, to materially represent any or all of these traits was a unique nineteenth-century solution to an enduring social situation.

The social function of the suite is explored in the following pages primarily through an investigation of continuity and change. Furniture industry catalogues and price lists, etiquette books, popular magazines, and books on domestic decoration all yielded information. Certain characteristics of parlor suites remained fixed throughout the period, suggesting that these attributes were directly connected to cultural assumptions about how suites--as tools used in achieving social results--should work. When any of these defining characteristics were not present, then the

several pieces of furniture might form a group or a collection or an assemblage, but not a suite.

Yet suites were not completely static during this time. Change could and did occur in those areas which were not essential to the definition. Also, in one area--decoration--variety was the expectation, resulting in a situation where the acceptance of change was one aspect of continuity. But, in general, change was subordinated to continuity.

At the close of the nineteenth century, parlors began to be called living rooms and parlor suites became living room suites. Names are one of the principal ways in which people organize the world around them.⁷ The new words indicated a crucial shift in attitudes and, probably to a lesser extent, in behavior. For a variety of reasons, parlor suites were no longer an adequate or appropriate symbol.

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

¹Gregory P. Stone and Harvey A. Farberman, Social Psychology Through Symbolic Interaction (Waltham, Mass.: Ginn-Blaisdell, 1970), p. 13.

²Tamotsu Shibutani, "Reference Groups as Perspectives," American Journal of Sociology 60 (May 1955): 564.

³Tamotsu Shibutani, Society and Personality: An Interactionist Approach to Social Psychology (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1961), p. 254.

⁴Shibutani, "Reference Groups," p. 569.

⁵Robert K. Merton, Social Theory and Social Structure (New York: Free Press, 1968), p. 337.

⁶Shibutani, Society and Personality, p. 256.

⁷Stephen Tyler, ed., Cognitive Anthropology (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969), p. 6.

CHAPTER ONE

ANTECEDENTS OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY PARLOR SUITES

Every society in every time period develops its own methods of fulfilling social needs, in part because the passage of time itself renders earlier solutions obsolete. New responses can be drawn only from the models available to the culture. Tracing the sources of a particular phenomenon, such as parlor suites, reveals which traditions have maintained their validity while also adapting to meet present needs.

The antecedents of late nineteenth-century American factory-made parlor suites can be identified in England and in France as early as the sixteenth century. Sets of upholstered chairs, sets of seating furniture, spring-upholstered chairs and custom-made parlor suites were all related phenomena.

English chairmakers produced upholstered chairs in sets during the reign of Elizabeth I.¹ Well-off American settlers of English stock bought sets of chairs, often in sixes and covered with leather, "Turkie work," or "serge," as recorded in inventories dating from the seventeenth and

early eighteenth centuries.² There is evidence that sets were sometimes ordered directly from England, like other goods.³

Numbers cut into the seat rails of individual, or pairs of, surviving eighteenth-century American chairs show that they were once parts of sets of six or a dozen matching chairs.⁴ The ledger of Solomon Fussell, a Philadelphia chairmaker of the second quarter of the eighteenth century, records the construction of sets of "mehogany" and walnut chairs.⁵

As early as the first quarter of the eighteenth century, English and American chairmakers were producing sets of seating furniture which included other seating forms in addition to chairs. In her book on American chairs, Patricia Kane notes, "On the occasion of the marriage of his daughter, Judith, in 1720, Samuel Sewall ordered from England 'A Duzzen of good black Walnut chairs, fine Cane, with a Couch.'"⁶ (A couch was what is now called a daybed.) Fussell sold six chairs and a matching couch in 1745.⁷ Other combinations of seating furniture were available by the late eighteenth century. Joseph Downs cited a list of furniture for sale by John Penn in 1788 which included three settees, two arm chairs and twenty-four chairs, all matching.⁸ William Palmer, a New York woodworker, made

eighteen grey and gold chairs and two matching settees for the White House early in the nineteenth century.⁹

From the beginning of the nineteenth century until the 1880s, French taste dominated American furniture. Imported French periodicals, furniture, and craftsmen influenced American fashions. One example of imported furniture was the suite brought from Paris for the White House in 1818. Made, at least in part, by Bellanger, it included two sofas, two bergères (enclosed arm chairs), eighteen arm chairs, eighteen chairs, four tabourets or stools for sitting, six foot stools, and two fire screens.¹⁰ Matching sets of furniture, apparently, were fashionable in France as well as in England and the United States. The agents charged with ordering the furniture described Bellanger in a letter as "the first Ébéniste in Paris."¹¹ A surviving suite, dated to 1810-19 and attributed to Charles-Honoré Lannuier, a French cabinetmaker who established himself in New York, consists of two arm chairs, four chairs, two settees or window seats, and two card tables.¹² Non-seating forms began to appear in suites, as in the two suites just described.

In the 1820s and 1830s, both European and American upholstered furniture began to incorporate the newly invented spiral or coiled inner spring. While springs had

occasionally been used in eighteenth-century furniture, this innovation, patented in the United States by Samuel Pratt in 1828 and first applied to mattress construction, soon revolutionized concepts of comfort.¹³ Dennis Young, contrasting these designs with those of the twentieth century, notes:

The traditional approach to the manufacture of upholstered chairs was the production of a skeleton of solid wood members jointed together in such a way that voids occurred in the parts of the chair where the concentrations of a sitting body weight were greatest. These voids were then spanned and filled with combinations of webbing, hessian, steel springs, hair and cotton lintens to produce controlled resilient supporting areas. It was through the combination of rigid skeleton and resilient 'flesh and muscle' that this traditional structure gave flexible support and cushioning to various body weights and sizes in a wide range of changeable sitting positions.¹⁴

What was "traditional" in the 1970s was very innovative in the 1830s and provided sitting comfort not possible previously. In general, only upholstered furniture appeared in parlor suites.

Leading American cabinetmakers produced custom-made suites in various styles through the second quarter and into the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Family history attributes an 1830s suite in the French Restoration style, now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, to Duncan Phyfe. The surviving pieces are a *méridienne* or lounge, a *curule* stool, a window bench and a gondola chair.¹⁵ Also

owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art are the remaining pieces of a suite made by Leon Marcotte in the Louis XVI style, circa 1860. The set originally had two sofas, a large cabinet, two small cabinets, two arm chairs, two lyre-back chairs, six chairs, and a fire screen.¹⁶

Perhaps the nineteenth-century suites most familiar today are those made by John Henry Belter of New York. A typical, elaborately carved parlor suite in the rococo revival style consisted of two sofas, two armchairs, four chairs, a center table, and an *étagère*,¹⁷ and would have cost about \$1,200 "which means that it was expensive yet priced about the same as the work of any of the best-known, fashionable New York cabinetmakers of that time."¹⁸

At least one mid-century American cabinetmaker, George Henkels of Philadelphia, imported French periodicals and French furniture for sale and to be used as models.¹⁹ There were probably many others who did the same, continuing the emphasis on French taste. Most important for this paper is that one of Henkels' advertisements suggests that expensive and fashionable French furniture was still being made in suites in the 1850s, thirty-five years after Bellanger. In 1852 Henkels advertised: "Rose Wood Drawing Room Furniture, new style, favorite designs now in vogue in Paris, For sale in sets, as imported, or made to order from

the samples which are regularly received."²⁰

The concept of the suite of furniture logically might be French since the word used to describe it is borrowed directly from that language. The etymology of the English word, "suite," is not as simple as it may appear, however, and deserves examination.

The popular Latin equivalent to "suite" was sequita, a past participle of sequere, to follow or to sue. The word became siute or siute in Old French; eventually suite in Modern French. After the Norman Conquest, however, the Old French version became siute in Anglo-Norman. The development of the word continued through the Middle English siute or siwte to the English word, "suit," of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.²¹ One of its many definitions is "a number of objects of the same kind or pattern intended to be used together or forming a definite set or series."²² The Oxford English Dictionary notes that the first known written example of this usage in connection with furniture dates from 1622: "A handsome sute of chairs."²³

English-speaking people in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries used the word "suit" to refer to groups of matching furniture. In the nineteenth century, the English borrowed the Modern French suite to replace, or

at least supplement, its English etymological cousin. The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology notes that the use of "suite" in reference to furniture dates from the nineteenth century and "is of English development."²⁴ The first known written use of the Modern French version in English was in the catalogue of the Crystal Palace exhibition in 1851.²⁵

Comparing French and English usage of "suite" makes the situation even clearer. The French word suite is never used in connection with furniture. Ameublement or mobilier refer to sets of furniture, but without implying that the pieces match.²⁶ Perhaps because of the dominance of French taste, "suite" became part of the English language. Nineteenth-century furniture industry catalogues used both spellings.

In the twentieth-century United States, the economic background of the speaker is generally thought to determine pronunciation: people of high-income groups say "suite" while people of low-income groups say "suit." This creates difficulties for furniture advertisers at times.²⁷

Turning from their antecedents to the suites themselves, one finds that the late nineteenth-century furniture catalogues and price lists which survive are an

excellent source of information for the study of parlor suites. Complete surviving suites are widely scattered. The reconstruction of a suite, based on one or two extant pieces, is difficult. But catalogues have both pictures and descriptions of intact parlor suites of all varieties, and price lists have descriptions.

The descriptions are more important than the illustrations when using catalogues as historical evidence except when studying style. Captions reveal that illustrations rarely showed all of the pieces of a suite. Understandably, it was common for identical pieces to appear only once, but there were no universal conventions. It is difficult, therefore, to determine the number and type of forms in a suite using only an illustration.

A survey of five library collections²⁸ uncovered over three hundred late nineteenth-century American catalogues and price lists depicting furniture of various kinds. Of the dated examples, sixty (see the Appendix) advertised parlor suites through descriptions and often pictures. The period covered runs from the early 1870s, when catalogues came into wide use, to the turn of the century, the point at which parlor suites metamorphosed into living room suites. There were five years--1884, 1892, 1894, 1896, and 1899--for which no catalogues or price lists

were available for the sample; the most for any one year is six from 1883. The majority of the years from 1871 to 1901 are represented by one or two catalogues or price lists (see Table 1). These sixty publications advertised a total of 924 parlor suites.

A geographic breakdown (Figure 1) indicates that New York City firms issued a substantial number of these catalogues and price lists--23 of 60. Despite the attention paid to the Midwestern furniture industry in the late nineteenth century, New York State was the leading producer of furniture by a wide margin throughout this period.²⁹ New York City was the home for many of these firms. The number of New York catalogues and price lists in the sample, then, is not surprising.

The analysis of data on the styles of suites, and the number, kind and combinations of forms in suites, reveals continuity and change. The following chapters will describe the parameters of both continuity and change in parlor suites.

Table 1.--Distribution of catalogues and price lists in the sample over time

1871 ###	1887 ###
1872 ####	1888 #
1873 #	1889 #
1874 #	1890 ##
1875 #	1891 ###
1876 ##	1892
1877 ##	1893 #
1878 #	1894 .
1879 ####	1895 ###
1880 #####	1896
1881 ###	1897 ##
1882 ##	1898 #
1883 #####	1899
1884	1900 #
1885 ##	1901 ##
1886 ###	Total: 60

= one catalogue or one price list

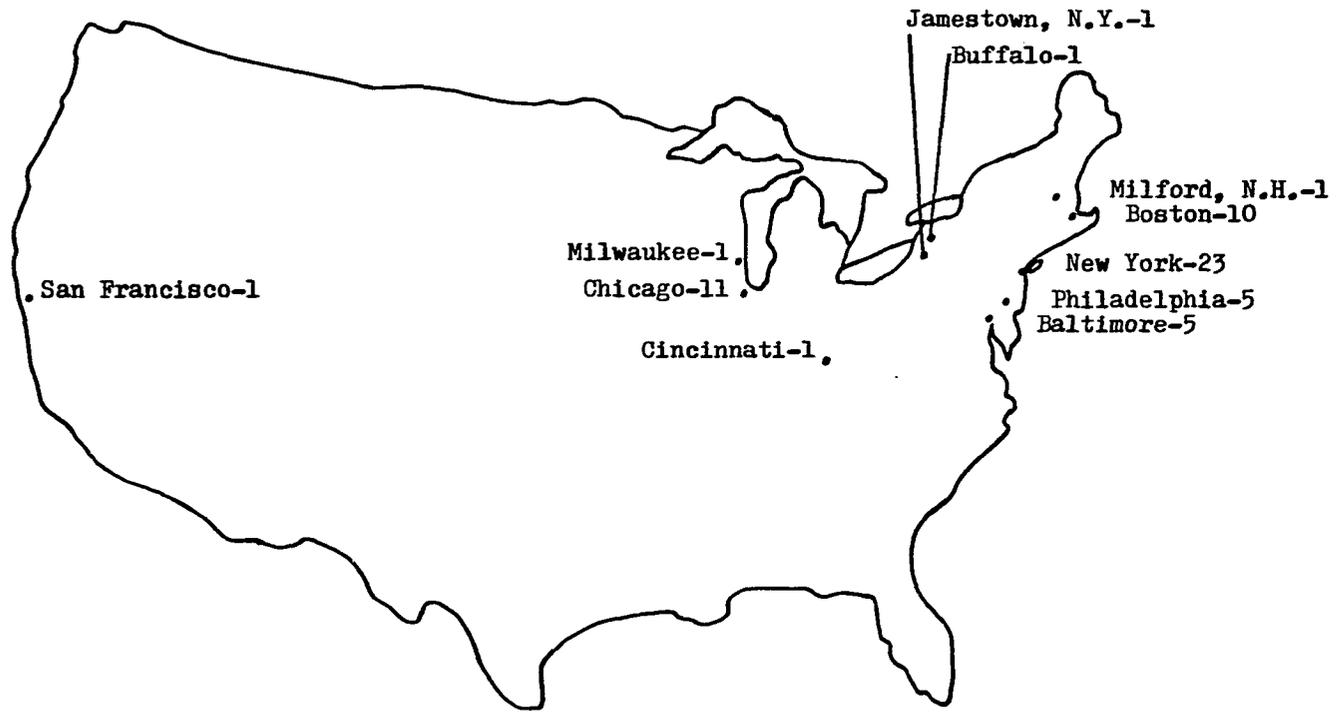


Figure 1.--Geographic distribution of the catalogues and price lists in the sample

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

¹John Gloag, A Short Dictionary of Furniture (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), p. 648.

²Patricia E. Kane, Three Hundred Years of American Seating Furniture: Chairs and Beds from the Mabel Brady Garvan and Other Collections at Yale University (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1976), pp. 30-31.

³Ibid., p. 56.

⁴Joseph Downs, American Furniture: Queen Anne and Chippendale Periods in the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum (New York: Bonanza Books, 1952), plates 52, 118, and 149, for example.

⁵Benno M. Forman, "Delaware Valley 'Crookt Foot' and Slat-Back Chairs: The Fussell-Savery Connection," Winterthur Portfolio 15 (Spring 1980): 43.

⁶Kane, American Seating Furniture, p. 56.

⁷Forman, "'Crookt Foot' and Slat-Back Chairs," p. 43.

⁸Downs, American Furniture, plate 271.

⁹Katherine Conover Hunt, "The White House Furnishings of the Madison Administration, 1809-1817," Master's thesis, University of Delaware, 1971, p. 62.

¹⁰Esther Singleton, The Story of the White House, 2 vols. (New York: The McClure Co., 1907), 1:114.

¹¹Ibid., 1:111.

¹²Lorraine Waxman, "French Influence on American Decorative Arts of the Early Nineteenth Century: The Work of Charles-Honoré Lannuier," Master's thesis, University of Delaware, 1958, p. 136.

¹³David A. Hanks, Innovative Furniture in America

From 1800 to the Present (New York: Horizon Press, 1981), p. 121. There is a slightly outdated but often cited discussion of the development of spring-upholstered furniture in Siegfried Giedion, Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1948), pp. 379-83.

¹⁴Dennis Young, "New Developments in Chair Manufacture," in Modern Chairs, 1918-1970 (Boston: Boston Book and Art, 1970), p. 14 quoted in Hanks, Innovative Furniture, p. 121. See Jonathan L. Fairbanks and Elizabeth Bidwell Bates, American Furniture: 1620 to the Present (New York: Richard Marek Publishers, 1981), pp. 402-3 for a series of illustrations showing the process of upholstering.

¹⁵Berry Tracy, Marilyn Johnson, Marvin D. Schwartz, and Suzanne Boorsch, Nineteenth-Century America: Furniture and Other Decorative Arts, Catalogue of an exhibition, April 16 to September 7, 1970 (New York: New York Graphic Society for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1970), plate 79.

¹⁶Robert Bishop, Centuries and Styles of the American Chair: 1640-1970 (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1972), p. 360.

¹⁷Marvin Schwartz, Edward J. Stanek, and Douglas K. True, The Furniture of John Henry Belter and the Rococo Revival (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1981), p. 11.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 2.

¹⁹Kenneth L. Ames, "Designed in France: Notes on the Transmission of French Style to America" in Winterthur Portfolio 12, ed. Ian M. G. Quimby (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977), p. 104.

²⁰Franklin Institute, Catalogue of the Twenty-Second Exhibition of American Manufactures (Philadelphia: William S. Young, 1852), p. 12 of the advertising section.

²¹Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology, 1966 ed., s.v. "suit."

²²Oxford English Dictionary, 1933 ed., s.v. "suit."

²³Ibid.

²⁴Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology, 1966 ed., s.v. "suite."

²⁵Oxford English Dictionary, 1933 ed., s.v. "suite."

²⁶Heath's Standard French and English Dictionary, 1962 ed., s.v. ameublement, mobilier.

²⁷Edward C. Ames, "Note on 'Suite,'" American Speech 12 (December 1937): 315.

²⁸The five library collections consulted were those at The Athenaeum of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; The Division of Domestic Life, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Eleutherian Mills Historical Library, Wilmington, Delaware; The Warshaw Collection of Business Americana, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; and Winterthur Museum Library, Winterthur, Delaware.

²⁹U.S., Department of the Interior, Census Office, Ninth Census, vol. 3, The Statistics of the Wealth and Industry of the United States (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872): 437, 438, 482; U.S., Department of the Interior, Census Office, Report on the Manufactures of the United States at the Tenth Census (June 1, 1880) (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1883), pp. 40-41, 81; U.S., Department of the Interior, Census Office, Report on the Manufacturing Industries of the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890, part 1, Totals for States and Industries (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1895), pp. 200-203; U.S., Department of the Interior, Census Office, Census Reports, vol. 7, Manufactures, part 1, United States by Industries (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Office, 1902): 218-25.

CHAPTER TWO

CONTINUITY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY PARLOR SUITES

In late nineteenth-century America, a factory-made parlor suite consisted of a sofa and one or more additional pieces of upholstered seating furniture, made to be used in a parlor. The pieces related visually to each other in style, scale, wood, and finish, the amount and quality of workmanship, the amount and kind of decoration, and the upholstery materials, techniques, and trimming. This general definition points up nine areas which showed continuity throughout the period under study, based on this sample. These attributes, therefore, related directly to cultural assumptions about suites, and served to identify certain sets of furniture as parlor suites. In the following pages each characteristic will be described separately.

1. Inclusion of a sofa A sofa was an indispensable part of a suite: of the 924 suites in the sample, 923 included a sofa, and one had two sofas.¹

2. Made up of two or more pieces of furniture
Suites had at least one piece of furniture in addition to the sofa. In this period, most often there were seven

Table 2.--Number and type of forms in the parlor suites in the sample*

Key of abbreviations for forms:

S = sofa	LA = ladies' arm chair
A = arm chair	W = window chair
C = chair	CC = corner chair
R = patent rocking chair	SS = sitting stool
L = ladies' chair	FS = foot stool
D = divan	

5 2-piece suites

5 of S A

50 3-piece suites

50 of S A C

15 4-piece suites

5 of S A C D
3 of S 2A C
3 of S A 2C
2 of S A C R
1 of S C D SS
1 of S A C D CC

85 5-piece suites

32 of S A 2C R
17 of S 2A 2C
11 of S A 2C D
8 of S A C R D
7 of S A 2C CC
2 of S 2A C CC
2 of S 2C R D
2 of S A C R W
1 of S A 2C L
1 of S C R W CC
1 of S A C R CC
1 of S A 2C W

151 6-piece suites

52 of S A 2C R D
31 of S A 2C R W
30 of S A 3C R
9 of S A C R W CC
5 of S A 3C L
5 of S 2A 2C W
4 of S 2A 3C
3 of S A 2C D W

6-piece suites (continued)

3 of S A 2C D L
2 of S A 2C R CC
2 of S A C R D W
2 of S A 2C D LA
1 of S A 3C W
1 of S C R D W CC
1 of S A 2C W CC

687 7-piece suites

312 of S A 4C R
240 of S A 4C L
113 of S 2A 4C
9 of S A 2C R W CC
4 of S 2A 3C W
3 of S A C R D W CC
1 of S A 2C R D W
1 of S A 3C R D
1 of S A 3C LA CC
1 of S A 3C W CC
1 of S 6C
1 of S A 3C R W

3 8-piece suites

1 of S 2A 4C FS
1 of 2S 6C
1 of S A 4C L W

*Variation in totals appearing in this table and Table 4 is due to suites of the same number of pieces being offered in two or more versions. These suites were counted once in Table 4 and as often as necessary in Table 2.

pieces, but sometimes five, three, or as few as two, and very occasionally as many as eight pieces.²

3. All seating furniture Factory-made suites consisted only of seating furniture: sofas, arm chairs, rocking chairs, and the like.³ None of the sixty catalogues and price lists in the sample show suites with tables, cabinets, or étagères like the custom-made suites from the beginning and middle of the century.

4. Associated with the parlor As shown by the name, parlor suites were always thought of in connection with the parlor. This nomenclature actually referred more to the type of behavior appropriate to the parlor, social visiting, than to a particular room in the house. People in the nineteenth century preferred specific-purpose rooms, such as reception rooms, music rooms, libraries, billiard rooms, ball rooms, and so on, to all-purpose rooms. But the people buying factory-made parlor suites often lived in small houses or apartments. For them, the room where the parlor suite stood became the parlor, if only when the suite was actually in use, creating the appearance of specificity.

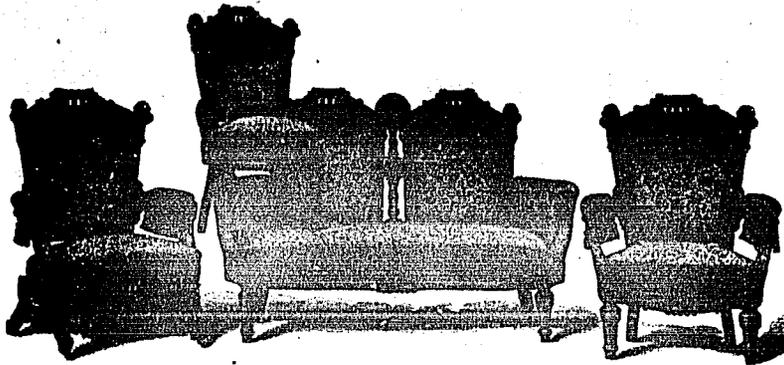
5. Visually related pieces of furniture Visual relationships linked the pieces of furniture in a suite. The general definition at the beginning of the chapter listed a number of the possible common denominators--for

example, wood, scale, and/or upholstery. A suite was instantly recognizable as a unit, though made up of many physically disparate parts. No matter how cluttered the room, it was still identifiable as a set.

Some catalogues listed one price for the entire suite, others gave separate prices for each form. Consumers, therefore, sometimes could pick and choose the pieces they wanted of a particular design. But due to the frequency with which the manufacturers offered new designs, it seems unlikely that a family was able to supplement its suite, once purchased, with additional pieces of the same design.

6. Spring-upholstered In general, parlor suites were upholstered and had springs incorporated into their cushions.

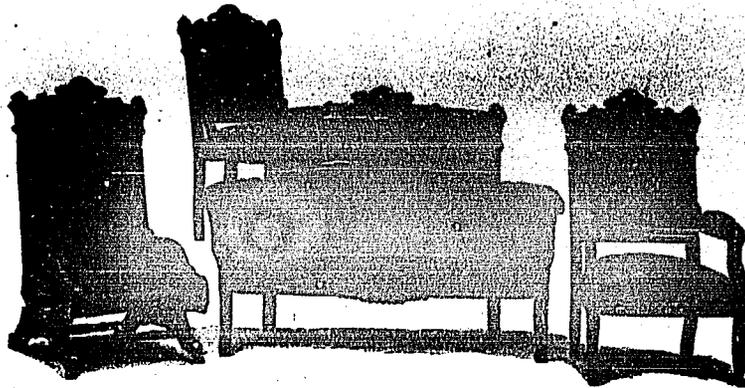
7. Range of prices Factory-made suites were always available in a wide price range, costing as little as \$15 or as much as \$500. Most manufacturers in this sample included a few inexpensive and a few very expensive suites in each line while concentrating primarily on suites in the \$40-to-\$200, or middle, range. A visual comparison of two seven-piece suites, one moderately priced (Figure 2) and one inexpensive (Figure 3), shows the kinds of economic limits within which manufacturers worked, depending on the segment



No. 20, SUIT, WALNUT OR EBONIZED.

Consisting of 7 Pieces. 1 Sofa, 1 Arm Chair, 1 Patent Rocker and 4 Chairs. A Full Sized Suit. Extreme length of Sofa front, 4 ft. 6 in. Representing Frames Ebonized and Gilded. Covered in Figured Goods, with our Patent Embroidered Band and Plush Trimmings.

Figure 2.--Moderately priced vertical rectilinear-style suite. From M. & H. Schrenkeisen, Illustrated Catalogue (New York: E. D. Slater, 1879), p. 70. (Winterthur Museum Library)



No. 201, LOW PRICED SUIT.

Consisting of 7 Pieces. 1 Sofa, 1 Arm Chair, 1 Patent Rocker, and 4 Chairs. A Medium Sized Suit. Extreme length of Sofa Front, 4 ft.

Figure 3.--Inexpensive vertical rectilinear-style suite. From M. & H. Schrenkeisen, Illustrated Catalogue (New York: E. D. Slater, 1879), p. 77. (Winterthur Museum Library)

of the market they were trying to reach.

Late nineteenth-century parlor furniture usually combined the aforementioned spring upholstery with a decorated and intricately joined frame. Michael Ettema found that, compared with high-style artifacts, "less expensive objects are not naive imitations of inferior quality, they are less labor and material intensive, and therefore are simplified objects designed in the same style."⁴ Four variables--decorative materials, structural materials, handwork, and machine work--could be manipulated along one continuum of quantity and another of quality. For example, the design in Figure 3 completely eliminated the veneer panels, leaving only incised lines to suggest the outlines of panels. The carving on the suite in Figure 3, compared to that in Figure 2, was reduced in amount and complexity: even when roughed out by machine, carving had to be finished by hand. The use of cheaper wood for the structural elements and/or cheaper upholstery material--sometimes noted in captions--would have caused a dramatic drop in quality and therefore in price. Finally, adapting the design for simple and/or fast machine techniques, such as cutting legs out of flat boards as in Figure 3, making them two-dimensional, rather than turning or carving them, was a guarantee of economy, but immediately recognizable as low in quality. The manufacturer advertised the suite in

Figure 3 specifically as a "low priced suit."

As a general rule, expensive designs included a great deal in both amount and quality of decorative and structural materials, handwork, and machine work. Yet the most expensive factory-made suites, until the 1890s, were the completely upholstered "Turkish" or overstuffed designs. Here the amount and quality of the fabric and the elaborate upholstering--the latter process could not be mechanized in any way--was so great that the visible frame was eliminated entirely from the equation.

Moderately priced designs showed reductions primarily in the amount and quality of decorative materials and handwork while the cheapest designs entailed economies in all areas. Some type of decoration and handwork, however, was always present.⁵

8. Choice of style At any one time, the consumer had a choice of two or three styles--one very fashionable, the others somewhat older. In practice, this meant that in addition to the newest designs, most companies included a few suites in every line in styles which by some standards were considered old-fashioned. These were not copies or revivals of antiques: they were styles which had been in continuous production for ten or fifteen years, ever since they had first become popular.

9. Options in decoration Within the broad style categories, the combinations of motifs and types of embellishment varied from one design to the next. Designs in a furniture company's line differed from one another primarily in decoration rather than in the number or type of forms included in the suite. The buyer chose not only a suite of a particular style, but, more specifically, one design in that style of the several available.

In summary, this examination of 924 parlor suites found that there were nine characteristics which remained the same throughout the period: the association with the parlor, the inclusion of a sofa, the presence of one or more pieces of furniture in addition to the sofa, the use of spring upholstery, the inclusion of only seating furniture, visual relationships among the pieces of furniture, choice of style, choice of decoration, and choice of price. Of these nine characteristics, some relate to the expression of social ties, some cluster together as means to symbolize wealth, and others relate to the expression of individuality. Several of the attributes function within more than one category.

1. Representation of social ties Parlor suites were one way to express sociability. The chairs in a suite were literally the setting for social interaction, with the sofa,

a piece of communal seating furniture, as the centerpiece. The presence of as many as eight chairs in a room signaled that it easily accommodated visitors.

The fact that the chairs and sofa matched further identified the visitors as peers of the host or hostess. Cary Carson and Lorena Walsh, commenting on the increasing use of matched sets of objects during the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century in America, have written:

Where artifacts of any kind are sufficiently numerous for everyone to have his own, people develop a closer personal identification with the everyday things they use. Furthermore, matched sets of chairs, drinking vessels, dishes, forks and knives, and so on convert an individual's self-identification into a broader association with those of his fellows who likewise possess and know how to use other pieces in the set. Suites, in other words, help define peer groups, and the artifacts themselves become emblems of the group's self-consciousness.⁶

It is therefore no surprise that suites were always placed in the parlor, a room which since the middle of the eighteenth century had lost its function as a combination sleeping/family entertaining room and had been "reserved for polite intercourse between social equals."⁷ In 1850, Andrew Jackson Downing wrote that "hospitality smiles in ample parlors."⁸ One woman in the early twentieth century, looking back at the parlors of her childhood, remembered them as rooms "held sacred to guests."⁹

As the only public or semi-public room in a small private house, magazines and books emphasized the importance of the parlor and its decoration over and over again. A pamphlet entitled Home Decorative Gems, issued by B. A. Atkinson & Co., a furniture company, in 1890, stated:

The Parlor may well be called the most important room in the house. Here it is that our visitors are entertained and here necessarily are formed the 'first impressions' which go so far towards shaping an opinion as to how the rest of the house may look.¹⁰

In an 1878 book on house furnishing, or interior decoration, Mrs. C. S. Jones wrote:

This is what the parlor of the beautiful and tasteful home should be, a room full of beauty and brightness, testifying at once to the large and generous hospitality, as well as to the taste and wide discrimination of the queen-mistress who reigns over the realm of which this is the state-chamber.¹¹

Twentieth-century theorists have begun to pay more attention to the house and, by extension, rooms and furniture, because it is the setting for so much human behavior. Edward T. Hall is an anthropologist concerned with proxemics, the study of the use of space. He writes, "Man's feeling about being properly oriented in space runs deep. Such knowledge is intimately linked to survival and sanity. To be disoriented in space is to be psychotic."¹² The organization of space is not the same in every culture, but is one more kind of taken-for-granted knowledge learned

through social interaction. Westerners organize their houses spatially--the specificity of rooms in the nineteenth century was not simply an American or a nineteenth-century phenomenon. Hall notes, "If, as sometimes happens, either the artifacts or the activities associated with one space are transferred to another space, this fact is immediately apparent."¹³ A parlor suite was not supposed to be used in a dining room or in a chamber--that would have violated assumptions about its purpose. In most houses, however, the use of many of the rooms cannot be identified solely by their size, woodwork, and wall decoration. Their positions in the house provide important clues, but the objects in the rooms are crucial to the observer's comprehension of what behavior is appropriate in them, whether it is a room for eating food or preparing food or socializing or sleeping. Thus the parlor suite identified which room was the parlor, or in a multi-purpose room, that here was where certain types of socializing took place at certain times. It is important to remember that people's "perception of space is dynamic because it is related to action--what can be done in a given space--rather than what is seen by passive viewing."¹⁴ People of modest means did not find their successively specific use of one room paradoxical. They were conforming as well as they could to both social expectations and economic realities. A parlor suite was

useful because it was so specific. Its presence, instead of several miscellaneous chairs, created a particular atmosphere valued by many groups.

Erving Goffman has analyzed social interactions from the perspective of theater with the individuals involved seen as actors and the situations as performances.¹⁵ He identifies a "front" or performance or public aspect to each interaction as well as a "back" or preparatory or private aspect. Whether the physical setting is a front or back area depends entirely on the context of the situation: the actors, their relationship to each other, their behavior, the time of day, their dress, and so on.

In general, however, since visiting occurred in the parlor, this room functioned as a front region. Goffman notes that

the decorations and permanent fixtures in a place where a particular performance is usually given, as well as the performers and the performance usually found there, tend to fix a kind of spell over it; even when the customary performance is not being given in it, the place tends to retain some of its front region character.¹⁶

The stereotype of a "scrubbed and silent room, forever orderly, ready."¹⁷ indicated that parlors were often thought of as permanent front areas along with churches and schoolrooms. Whether nineteenth-century behavior in fact conformed to such restricted use is difficult to determine.

But it is clear that the parlor's potential as a front region had much to do with its appeal to those who had, or wanted to have, a parlor.

Goffman also points out that people must choose to use a particular space:

A setting tends to stay put, geographically speaking, so that those who would use a particular setting as part of their performance cannot begin their act until they have brought themselves to the appropriate place and must terminate their performance when they leave.¹⁸

Servants helped make it possible for the actors to be assembled in the parlor at the right time and in the right way. The implicit rules which governed social calling also ensured that the correct setting would be employed.

2. Demonstration of wealth Parlor suites were also a means to display wealth. In late nineteenth-century America, "the dominant concept of success was one of opulent materialism competitively won."¹⁹ Objects assumed even more importance than previously as ways to demonstrate economic and social status. John Cawelti has noted that in Horatio Alger novels, "inner attainments are marked by characteristic external signs. The most crucial event in the hero's life is his acquisition of a good suit."²⁰ For others, the external sign was the purchase of a parlor suite.

It is almost unnecessary to reiterate that artifacts

can say "things a person does not say about himself without seeming conceited, anxious for compliments or arrogantly humble."²¹ But the use of objects to communicate instead of words also involves more subtle dynamics:

Words are perceived by one or two sensory modalities, objects usually by more. Furthermore, when objects are steadily observed, they exert a continual influence upon our sense organs without necessarily producing perceptive fatigue. . . .²²

Throughout the course of a social call, the visitor, consciously or unconsciously, noted the richness of the decoration on the parlor suite, relaxed against the cushions, felt the texture of the upholstery, and so on. Veblen's "conspicuous consumption"²³ was one of the means by which an individual or a family notified others of economic progress.

There was, however, ambivalence within the society about the accumulation and display of wealth. Social achievement had to be linked to economic attainment for the latter to be acceptable. Samuel Sloan wrote in 1867:

Lavish expenditure on ornament does not always produce the effect desired, and many rooms, where luxury without taste predominates, only serve to display the wealth of the owner.²⁴

One writer cautioned that when making purchases it was necessary to take into account "not merely what would adorn, but what may suit our character, position, and circumstances."²⁵

Yet the tradition that the parlor was the "best room" in the house and contained the family's most valued possessions continued to be strong during this period. As one etiquette book admonished: "Never sit gazing curiously around the room when paying a call, as if taking a mental inventory of the furniture. It is excessively rude."²⁶

The presence of spring upholstery signaled wealth not only because springs were a recent innovation but also because for centuries textile-covered chairs had been within the reach of only the very well-off members of Western society. The dropping prices of textiles in the nineteenth century had not yet eroded the traditionally high status associated with them. And certainly the opportunities for decoration and handwork which parlor suites provided made them prime candidates to be status symbols.

But suites were a special case. They were not usually the only furniture, or even the only seating furniture, in the parlor. One 1882 catalogue noted under illustrations of chairs, "the above odd pieces can be used with any Parlor Suit."²⁷ Another catalogue, also from the 1880s, captioned a picture of a suite with this statement: "This is . . . a very handsome suit and together with a few chairs of other styles will furnish any parlor elegantly."²⁸ Yet the visual links among the pieces of furniture set

suites apart from other furniture. The pieces combined to form one large unit of furniture which told the visitor that the family had been able to afford a substantial one-time expenditure in the guise of several chairs and a sofa. Not only did each piece of furniture carry its separate message of lavish decoration and expensive upholstery, but the aggregate multiplied the effect exponentially.

3. Expression of individuality Since the consumers had at the very least a choice of style and decoration, this points to a positive value being placed on the expression of individuality. Domestic rooms were supposed to show personal taste in much the same way as clothing. Suites were one element of individual decoration. The many varied designs offered in each line and from year to year ensured that people would be able to choose on the basis of their own taste. Within the boundaries of the definition, there was an opportunity for the individual to make decisions. Flexible norms governed the use of parlor suites.

The argument that convention limited the purchasers' choices holds that in reality they had few or no options.

As Shibutani notes:

Once an individual has incorporated the values shared in his group they no longer appear to him as limitations against which he is opposed, although in some instances this may be the case. The socially approved alternatives are usually the only images that are evoked. In general, men act

in accordance with group norms, not from a fear of punishment but from an intuitive sense of what is right.²⁹

Whether the choices were illusory or not depends upon the interpretation of the observer. Nevertheless, individuals felt they had options.

The allowance for personal taste in the designs of parlor suites sanctioned variety. In this way the expectation of change became one aspect of continuity. Other innovations, however, resulted in suites which became very different from earlier suites, over time, and will be dealt with in Chapter Three.

After examining how parlor suites symbolized social ties, wealth, and individuality, the next question which might be asked is whether every family that owned a suite, or every reference group that encouraged the use of suites, was trying to express these attributes. Certainly some people bought suites as an easy and quick way to furnish much of a room. Or some buyers were unsure of their own taste and wanted to rely on the manufacturer's choice of matching chairs. The fragmentary evidence that survives reveals little about the motivations of individuals. But there are some facts which point to the preferences of different reference groups.

Evidence of geographically-based reference groups

appears in notices included in the two catalogues for Fall and Winter 1891-92 issued by Butler Brothers, one published in New York and the other in Chicago. The notice states:

The styles of goods in demand in different sections of the Union vary so much and the cost of freight bears such an important relation to the value of the goods that it is impossible for both of our houses to sell the same patterns of furniture.³⁰

The two catalogues offered similar, but not identical, suites.

The availability of less fashionable as well as fashionable styles demonstrates that some groups were conservative, as would be expected. The members of these groups bought suites in styles which had first been popular as long as twenty years before.

The wide range of prices indicates that manufacturers catered to working-class as well as middle-class purchasers. A study of working-class homes by Elizabeth Cohen suggests that the working class used suites only as symbols of wealth, not of sociability. She found that,

whereas the middle-class home provided a setting for a wide range of complex interactions related to work, family and community, and therefore required distinctions between private and public space, workers conceived of home as a private realm distinct from the public world. Because workers only invited close friends and family inside, the kitchen provided an appropriate setting for most exchange. Relationships with more distant acquaintances took place in the neighborhood

--on the street or within shops, saloons or churches.³¹

Workers did buy parlor suites, however, and put them in parlors. For the ethnic groups that formed much of the working class in this period, upholstered furniture may have transferred the tradition of large, soft, lavishly embellished beds to an American context. "As the parlor appeared on the home scene, workers brought traditional bed-associated standards to their newly acquired and prized possessions."³² Cohen found "a surprisingly consistent American working-class material ethos that was distinct from that of the middle class."³³

The social meaning of a parlor suite was adapted to the needs and beliefs of the reference group. The individual, or the group, worked out compromises which remained within the basic concept of the parlor suite.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

¹See Table 2.

²See Table 2.

³See Table 2.

⁴Michael J. Ettema, "Technological Innovation and Design Economics in Furniture Manufacture," Winterthur Portfolio 16 (Summer/Autumn 1981): 199.

⁵For a more detailed discussion of the economics of design, see Ettema, "Technological Innovation," especially pp. 198-205.

⁶Cary Carson and Lorena S. Walsh, "The Material Life of the Early American Housewife," Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1982, pp. 39-40.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁸Andrew Jackson Downing, The Architecture of Country Houses (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1850; reprint ed., New York: Dover Publications, 1969), p. 23.

⁹"The Passing of the Parlor," Atlantic Monthly 91 (May 1903): 714.

¹⁰B. A. Atkinson & Co., Home Decorative Gems (Boston: Press of Robinson & Stephenson, 1890), n.p.

¹¹Mrs. C. S. Jones and Henry T. Williams, Beautiful Homes or Hints in House Furnishing, Williams' Household Series, vol. 4 (New York: Henry T. Williams, 1878), p. 111.

¹²Edward T. Hall, The Hidden Dimension (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1969), p. 105.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹⁵Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Every-

day Life (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959).

¹⁶Ibid., p. 124.

¹⁷"The Passing of the Parlor," p. 713.

¹⁸Goffman, Presentation of Self, p. 22.

¹⁹Rex Burns, Success in America: The Yeoman Dream and the Industrial Revolution (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1976), p. 167.

²⁰John G. Cawelti, Apostles of the Self-made Man (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 118.

²¹Jurgen Ruesch and Weldon Kees, Nonverbal Communication: Notes on the Visual Perception of Human Relations (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956), p. 108.

²²Ibid., p. 96.

²³Thorstein Veblen, The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1912).

²⁴Samuel Sloan, Sloan's Homestead Architecture, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1867), p. 311.

²⁵Emily Thornwell, The Lady's Guide to Perfect Gentility, in Manners, Dress, and Conversation, in the Family, in Company, at the Piano Forte, the Table, in the Street, and in Gentlemen's Society (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1856), p. 70.

²⁶Florence Hartley, The Ladies' Book of Etiquette, and Manual of Politeness (Boston: G.W. Cottrell, 1860), p. 84.

²⁷C. C. Holton, Parlor Furniture (Chicago: Knight & Leonard, 1882), p. 4.

²⁸A. J. Neuberger, Illustrated Catalogue of Furniture (Chicago: E. Rubovits, [1880s]), p. 31.

²⁹Shibutani, Society and Personality, p. 278.

³⁰Butler Brothers, Special Supplement to "Our Drummer": Specialties in Furniture (Chicago: n.p., Fall & Winter 1891-92), n.p.; Butler Brothers, Supplementary

Catalogue to "Our Drummer": Specialties in Furniture (New York: n.p., Fall & Winter 1891-92), p. 1.

³¹Lizabeth A. Cohen, "Embellishing a Life of Labor: An Interpretation of the Material Culture of American Working-Class Homes, 1885-1915," Journal of American Culture 3 (Winter 1980): 764.

³²Ibid., p. 767.

³³Ibid., p. 770.

CHAPTER THREE

CHANGE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY PARLOR SUITES

During the last thirty years of the nineteenth century certain aspects of parlor suites changed. The three ways in which later parlor suites were distinctly different from earlier parlor suites were in the variety of forms they included, the number of pieces, and in style. At any one time these changes allowed for options, but over time, the alterations resulted in significant differences in what was offered for sale.

Any discussion of innovation and change must recognize that the concept is culturally defined like all other concepts. H. G. Barnett found that:

Change is expected only between certain minimal and maximal boundaries. It is constrained by traditional conceptions of propriety, and by traditional definitions of what constitutes newness. If it falls below the minimum, it is regarded as nothing new, as a mere variant, even though to the objective observer this pronouncement may seem entirely arbitrary. On the other hand, if it goes beyond the limits of expectation, it will be greeted with varying degrees of resistance. . . .¹

It is almost impossible to reconstruct how people perceived the alterations in parlor suites in the nineteenth century. But it is clear from the terminology that new styles and new

combinations of furniture did not affect the basic concept of the suite. The concept had been endowed with an amazing amount of flexibility. Assemblages of furniture which looked different, had different numbers of pieces, and were made up of different forms were still classified and comprehended by one term.

Barnett indicated that radical changes evoke resistance. Alternatively, changes which may appear radical to an observer, but which are congruent with new attitudes and values, may transform the artifact in any of a number of ways: appearance, function, nomenclature, and so on. The switch from parlor to living room suites appears to have been primarily a change of attitudes.

Even with its strong foundation of continuity, there is no denying that change was an important factor in late nineteenth-century life. By the 1860s, photographs quickly advertised the continual stream of new furniture and designs. The fact that many firms issued catalogues "of the latest designs" yearly or seasonally is evidence of the emphasis on new models. An 1880 article about M. & H. Schrenkeisen described the company as "being constantly engaged in contriving something new which is likely to please the artistic taste of the community."²

The most apparent changes were in styles, and much

energy has been spent in attempts to categorize and classify the furniture styles of the nineteenth century, primarily using custom-made furniture as examples. The earlier discussion about the economics of design noted that less expensive furniture, specifically that which was factory-made, in actuality was simplified so as to be less material- and labor-intensive. Other differences between high-style and mass-produced furniture are often explained by the amount of time required to retool machines for new designs. A close study of the furniture catalogues in the sample and a knowledge of reference group theory, however, suggests that the variations in the style-bearing characteristics of custom-made and factory-made furniture were based on more than time-lag or economics. The upper class did not provide the only model of fashion. Cohen's article on the material culture of the working class, for example, provides evidence that traditional bed-related standards were transferred to spring-upholstered furniture when the immigrants were exposed to the new artifacts. The upper class styles of the 1860s, 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s provided inspiration, but not exact models, for the factory-produced furniture of that time period.

Table 3 identifies seven styles in a typology of factory-made furniture from 1871 to 1901, and shows the incidence of each style based on the catalogues in this

sample. The styles are identified and named according to their characteristics and not because of apparent antecedents or parallel elite styles. The table is arranged to show the incidence of these styles over time, to give some indication of their relative popularity. During the early 1870s, when this study begins, there were three styles being shown: "rococo revival," "partially overstuffed," and "vertical rectilinear." The first was advertised infrequently after the late 1870s, but the other two were available into the 1890s. The vertical rectilinear was the dominant mode in the late 1870s and the 1880s. Both the "horizontal rectilinear" and "overstuffed" began to appear in the late 1870s and continued through the 1880s, the former declining in popularity in the 1890s, but the latter perhaps even increasing in popularity in that decade. The "lacy" style, first advertised in the late 1880s, was still being offered at the time this study ends in 1901. The seventh style, or styles, the "revivals," appeared only at the very end of the century, in the mid-to-late 1890s.

1. Rococo revival The rococo revival style (Figure 4) had been popular in this country since the 1850s and such suites were available through the 1880s. Derived from eighteenth-century French models, the seating furniture consisted of an exposed shaped and finished wooden frame with an upholstered seat and back. The overall effect of a

Table 3--Incidence of styles in the catalogues and price lists in the sample over time

Number of suites:

Year	Rococo Revival	Part'ly Over-stuffed	Vert. Recti-linear	Over-stuffed	Horiz. Recti-linear	Lacy	Revival
1871	4	1	3				
1872	18	4	13				
1873							
1874	2		1				
1875	1	1	1				
1876	2	2	7				
1877					1		
1878		1	3				
1879	1	4	34	1	3		
1880	2						
1881		3	31	3	2		
1882		1	20	1	3		
1883	2	6	52	4	7		
1884							
1885		1	14	1	8		
1886	2		7		2		
1887		1	12	4	15	1	
1888	1		2		1		
1889		1	2		8	3	
1890			3	8	5	5	
1891			2	10	4	3	
1892							
1893				1		6	
1894							
1895		2		10	1		22
1896							
1897		1	2	8	2	21	2
1898				4		17	
1899							
1900				2		4	
1901				6		13	3
Tot.	35	29	209	63	62	73	27

Total number of suites: 498

Total number of catalogues: 42 (18 contain no illustrations)

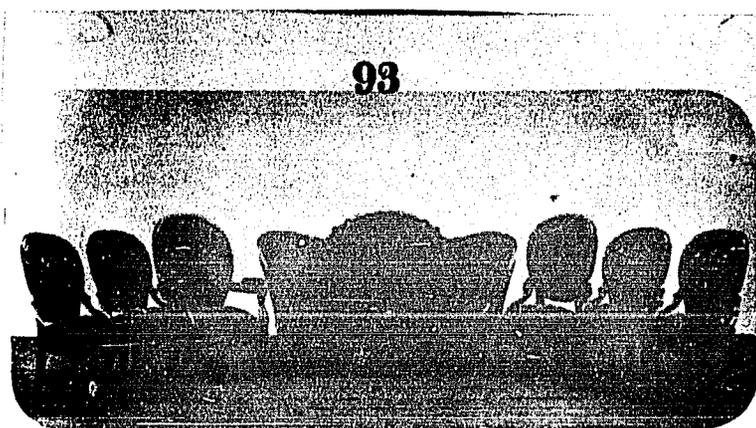


Figure 4.--Rococo revival-style suite. From California Furniture Manufacturing Company, [catalogue] (San Francisco: A. J. Leary [circa 1874-76]), #93. (Downs Collection, Winterthur Museum Library)

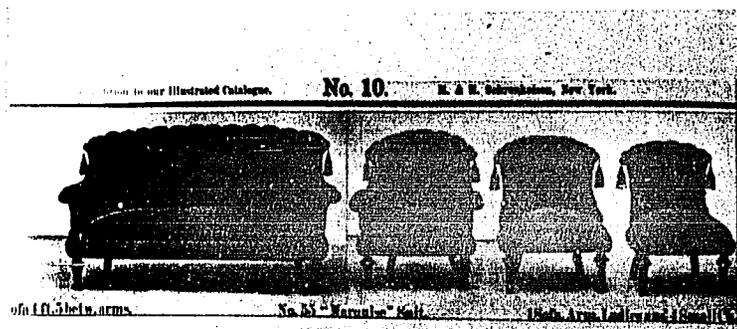


Figure 5.--Partially overstuffed-style suite. From M. & H. Schrenkeisen, Supplement to Illustrated Catalogue of Parlor Furniture (New York: n.p., 1872), plate 10. (Bourne Sale, Downs Collection, Winterthur Museum Library)

flowing, almost organic, whole was a result of the predominantly curvilinear lines of the designs, including cabriole-type legs, and concealed joinery. The back and arms of the sofa blended into the seat frame, forming one large curving piece. In contrast, the arms of the chairs were usually open, with a pad of upholstery. The frame, especially the crest rail, was carved, often with naturalistic motifs. The upholstery might be completely smooth, as in Figure 4, or tufted.

2. Partially overstuffed Here the furniture was upholstered except for the legs and sometimes the seat rails (see Figure 5). The exact character of the undercarriage was related to currently fashionable styles; partially overstuffed-style furniture appeared through the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s. Rather than a separate style, partially overstuffed-style furniture may have been considered a variant of overstuffed-style furniture which did not appear in the catalogues in this sample until the end of the 1870s.

3. Vertical rectilinear Shown in Figures 2 and 3, designs in this style were primarily rectilinear although with some curvilinear elements. Like the rococo revival style, this style had exposed and decorated wood frames with upholstered seats and backs, but there similarities ended. These chairs and sofas consisted of disparate elements

combined to create a unified, if busy, whole. No attempt was made to conceal the joinery: in fact, the right angle joints were often accentuated with medallion motifs. Legs were usually turned. The crest rail had a central motif as well as two subordinate motifs, one on each end. Sometimes the sofa back had three elements: a central section of carved wood and two upholstered sections flanking it, as in Figure 2. The decoration was chosen from among the following possibilities: carving, gilding, ebonizing or the use of applied veneer panels, roundels, incised lines, spindles, fretwork, fringe, braid, and/or a wooden "drop" on the front apron. The upholstery was sometimes elaborately tufted.

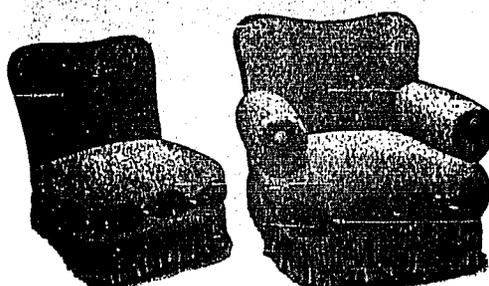
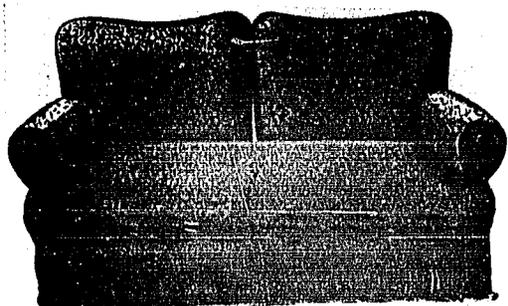
Mass-produced vertical rectilinear-style furniture was related to three styles which have been identified in elite furniture: Renaissance revival, neo-grec, and Eastlake. The first contributed its architectonic quality, complex outline, and decorative features such as panels, incised lines, roundels, and other turned ornament³, while the influence of the second was apparent in the intricacy of the decoration, joinery, and upholstery; the openness of the design; the eccentric proportions and forms; and the "genial conflict of curvilinear and rectilinear elements."⁴ The third style provided the emphasis on rectilinearity and "honest"--or at least obvious--construction.⁵

4. Overstuffed These suites (Figure 6) differed from partially overstuffed-style furniture in that even the legs and seat rails were entirely hidden by flaps of material and/or fringe. Due to the cost of the fabric, and the handwork necessary to upholster them, overstuffed and partially overstuffed-style suites were relatively expensive, priced comparably to the more elaborate versions of the other styles, and they represented the upper limit of factory-made suites. Less expensive overstuffed-style suites appeared in the 1890s, economically feasible because of the use of cheap fabric, flimsy construction, and simple upholstery.

Essentially curvilinear due to the springs and upholstering, overstuffed-style furniture, in addition, tended to have straight, over-upholstered crest rails. The result was furniture with a horizontal orientation, unlike the vertical orientation of the rococo revival, vertical rectilinear, and partially overstuffed styles. E. H. Gombrich, the art historian, has written:

Undoubtedly there is also something in the traditional view that the vertical has altogether a different meaning for us than the horizontal. We associate height with effort and with dominance and we tend to think of this dimension in different terms from the way we think of length and breadth.⁶

Originally, this style of furniture had been associated with



PARLOR SUITE, No. 71.

Figure 6.--Overstuffed-style suite. From Bub & Kipp, New Illustrated Catalogue of Upholstered Furniture (Milwaukee, Wisc.: King, Fowle & Katz, 1887-88), p. 53. (Winterthur Museum Library)

the pillows of what was thought to be the sensual, comfort-loving East. By the end of the century, this connection had probably lost most of its impact, but the furniture retained its horizontal orientation, setting it apart from most furniture based on Western models.

5. Horizontal rectilinear Another style which became popular in the United States in the late 1870s and 1880s is shown in Figure 7, and also had an horizontal orientation. Called the "horizontal rectilinear" in this study, it was related in many ways to the vertical rectilinear style. Although curvilinear elements appeared, again the rectilinear elements predominated. The joinery tended to be obvious and based on the right angle. Incising was often used as a decorative feature, as were spindles and fretwork. The legs were turned. In this style, however, the crest rail was either over-upholstered or, if exposed, straight without any kind of central motif. This style was heavily influenced by elite Eastlake models, mentioned earlier in connection with the vertical rectilinear style.

Charles Locke Eastlake was an Englishman whose influential book, Hints on Household Taste, was printed in the United States in 1872, but his ideas, part of the reform movement in England, had already crossed the ocean. While English reformers, including Eastlake, John Ruskin and

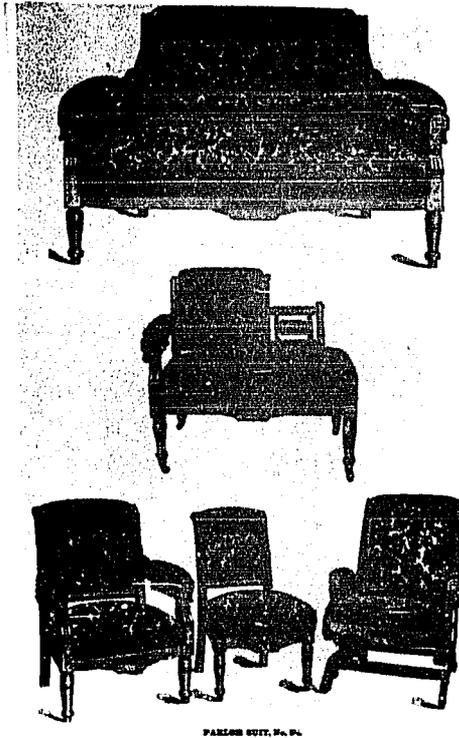


Figure 7.--Horizontal rectilinear-style suite. From Bub & Kipp, New Illustrated Catalogue of Upholstered Furniture (Milwaukee, Wisc.: King, Fowle & Katz, 1887-88), p. 39. (Winterthur Museum Library)

William Morris, among others, were encouraging a national style based on medieval models to replace the popular French-derived rococo and Renaissance revival styles, Americans were simply importing another fashion, though this one brought a philosophy with it.⁷ Furniture producers varied in their understanding of, and adherence to, Eastlakean precepts. The amount of decoration, upholstery, and fringe on horizontal rectilinear-style furniture suggested that its closest relative was still the vertical rectilinear style in spite of the rejection of the vertical orientation.

6. Lacy In the late 1880s and 1890s another style similar to the vertical rectilinear appeared, here called "lacy," and pictured in Figure 8. The lines were the same as in the vertical rectilinear style but the legs might be turned, square in section or cabriole-type. Often there was carving or fretwork underneath the arms. Irregular shapes were used for chair and sofa backs, and they had a lacy effect through an interplay of upholstered areas, voids, plain wood, and shallowly carved or pressed areas. The vertically oriented crest rail consisted of an undulating line created by a central crest flanked on the ends by two smaller motifs. Lacy-style furniture gave the impression of being fragile and underbuilt, and often had a minimum of upholstery. Always moderately priced, the lacy style never

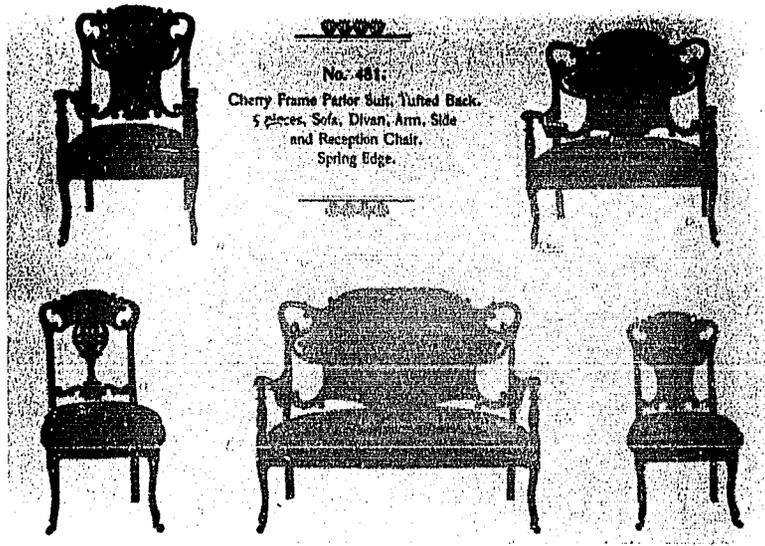


Figure 8.--Lacy-style suite. From Goldstrom Bros. & Pines, Catalogue, 1898 (Baltimore: Kohn & Pollock, 1898), p. 22. (Winterthur Museum Library)

ADDRESS ALL ORDERS TO GEO. D. WILLIAMS CO., 350 and 352 WABASH AVE., CHICAGO.

No. 5004. SUITE: Three pieces, mahogany, polished; heavy casted legs, covered in silk damask, or velvet. Weight 180 lbs.

	A	B	C
Side	\$27 00	\$40 00	\$44 00
Strawman's Chair	17 00	16 00	20 00
Parlor Chair	27 00	26 00	30 00
Suite, complete	\$91 00	\$82 00	\$100 00

Figure 9.--Revival-style suite. From Geo. D. Williams Co., Wholesale Furniture (Chicago: n.p., 1901), p. 132. (Winterthur Museum Library)

showed the same economic range as the rococo revival or vertical rectilinear styles.

7. Revival The seventh style in the typology actually is a group of styles related to each other by inspiration rather than by appearance. All were based on styles originally popular in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries both in America and in Europe. While it is often thought that these "colonial" styles appeared at the time of the Centennial in 1876, Rodris Roth notes that it was not until the 1890s that this type of furniture began to be produced in any numbers.⁸ Roth's findings are supported by the data in this catalogue sample. (See Table 3).

These were not exact copies of the earlier styles, and in some instances, outside observers might find the connections tenuous. Some were specifically advertised as revivals, others were not. Revival designs in the catalogues surveyed were based on Sheraton, Grecian, French empire, Chippendale, American empire, and rococo revival models, the last reappearing after a hiatus of fewer than twenty years. While a few versions were inexpensive, most were more costly than lacy-style furniture, tending to fall into the range formerly occupied by overstuffed-style furniture.

Any discussion of copies of earlier furniture, or even styles influenced by current elite fashions, is difficult because it is not always clear exactly what the copyists considered the key elements of the original to which they were trying to be faithful. When studying medieval copies of earlier buildings, for instance, Richard Krautheimer discovered that the physical appearance of the original and its copy were rarely the same. Medieval attitudes resulted in a "procedure of breaking up the original into its single parts and of reshuffling these, [which] also makes it possible to enrich the copy by adding to it elements quite foreign to the original. . . ."9 In terms of nineteenth-century furniture, and especially revival-style furniture, additional research is needed into attitudes toward copying.

In summary, the seven styles typical of mass-produced furniture related to both earlier historical styles and contemporary elite styles. But the designers of factory-made furniture were responding to the preferences of groups other than the economic and social upper class. This furniture was not only less expensive than custom-made furniture, but it also reflected different needs, lifestyles, and ideas of beauty.

Besides style, another way of introducing novelty

into the design of a parlor suite was to vary the number of pieces of furniture sold together as a suite. Table 4 shows the incidence of each suite size--from two pieces to eight pieces--during the thirty-year period and indicates a strong trend toward suites with fewer pieces of furniture in them. The 1870s and 1880s emphasized seven-piece suites, but very few were offered in the 1890s. By that time, five- and three-piece suites predominated.

Yet as the suites decreased in the number of pieces included, they became more diverse, as measured by the number of different furniture forms incorporated into them (see Table 5). During the 1870s and early 1880s, most suites had seven pieces made up of combinations of only three or four forms, usually a sofa, an arm chair or two, a "Ladies'" chair or patent rocking chair, and four chairs. The peak of variety occurred in the 1880s when some suites had as many forms as pieces, and most included four or five different forms. Divans, corner chairs, and window chairs--the last similar to arm chairs--were added to the other forms. Thus, the apparent trend toward fewer forms in the 1890s was balanced by the smaller number of pieces in suites.

Diversity was also evident at times in decoration, but more often in upholstery. The Chicago firm of C. C.

Table 4--Number of pieces of furniture in the parlor suites
in the sample over time

Number of pieces of furniture:

Year	2	3	4	5	5 or 6	6	6 or 7	7	8	No data
1871								70		
1872								115	1	9
1873								35		
1874								3		
1875								3		
1876								6		5
1877								15	1	
1878								4		
1879						1	40	41		
1880								81		
1881								67	1	
1882				1		4		47		
1883		2		3		17	6	51		4
1884										
1885				2		5	7	10		
1886						7		24		
1887		2	1	2		9	19	18		
1888						1		3		
1889			1		2	9	2			
1890		2	1	10		3				5
1891		2	7	8		2				
1892										
1893				1		6				
1894										
1895	3	24	4	4						
1896										
1897	2	11		17		5		1		
1898				14		6		1		
1899										
1900			1	5						
1901		7		15						
Tot.	5	50	15	82	2	75	74	595	3	23

Total number of suites: 924

Total number of catalogues: 60

Table 5--Number of furniture forms in the parlor suites in the sample over time

Number of forms:

Year	2	3	4	5	6	7	No data
1871		14	56				
1872	1	23	92				9
1873	1	9	25				
1874		1	2				
1875			3				
1876		2	4				5
1877		8	7	1			
1878		2	2				
1879		27	55				
1880		7	74				
1881		9	59				
1882		8	40	4			
1883		5	53	18	3		4
1884							
1885			11	10	3		
1886		2	15	5	9		
1887		3	34	7	4	3	
1888			3	1			
1889			3	9	2		
1890		4	7	5			5
1891		3	13	3			
1892							
1893			1	6			
1894							
1895	3	29	3				
1896							
1897	2	13	12	9			
1898		9	6	6			
1899							
1900			5	1			
1901		7	15				
Tot.	7	185	600	85	21	3	23

Total number of suites: 924

Total number of catalogues: 60

Holton advertised two suites in 1882 "made with two Parlor chairs to match [the] ends of [the] Sofa, and two to match [the] center."¹⁰ In general, however, each design was relatively unified in decoration though quite different from the other designs in the line.

Three catalogues in the sample, dating from 1891-92, circa 1895, and 1901, offered perhaps the extreme of variety, as demonstrated by the 1891-92 caption:

The suit is upholstered in good quality mohair crushed plush as follows: the two-back sofa in crimson, patent rocker in gold color, arm chair in gobelin blue, one side chair in light blue and the other in crimson. These colors will make a very pretty effect and will please a great many people who dislike to have an entire parlor suit exactly alike. . . . N.B.--We furnish the above suit in all red or blue or in any of the colors named at the same price.¹¹

All of these attributes of suites--the style, number of pieces, kinds of forms, and color of upholstery--were affected by several factors, one of which was a shift in the standards of beauty, beginning in the 1850s. In reaction against the neo-classical styles of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries--federal, empire, and pillar and scroll--the emphasis came to be on visual complexity. The unity of dissimilarity, or the picturesque, was preferred to the harmony of similarity. Carroll L. V. Meeks, in studying the architecture of the period, found that "the basis of taste was shifting from reason to sensibility. . . . The

unique feature of the new theory was its consistent emphasis on visual qualities."¹² There were five traits of picturesqueness which Meeks identified: variety, movement, irregularity, intricacy, and roughness.¹³ All can be detected in the furniture styles, especially rococo revival, vertical rectilinear, horizontal rectilinear, and lacy. In relation to the use of parlor suites as symbols of wealth, it is interesting to note Meeks' observation that "an effect of richness, which we tend to condemn as vulgar and showy and which Veblen called 'conspicuous consumption' was preferable to looking pinched and meager, in fact was consciously sought for."¹⁴

The concept of the suite itself was an expression of the picturesque, combining several different forms of furniture which were nevertheless visually related. There is some evidence to suggest, however, that the suites of the 1870s and early 1880s were not really considered diverse. One 1882 book on household decoration stated, "'sets' . . . quite destroy the charm of interest and variety that is produced by having few things alike."¹⁵ The people who ordered suites with multi-color upholstery may have thought that all the pieces in a monochromatic suite looked alike.

In addition to showing the influence of the picturesque, these reactions may have had something to do

with the rhetoric of the reform movement. Eastlake and others were trying to change what they saw as the overriding characteristics of mass-produced furniture: shoddy workmanship, excessive and inappropriate ornamentation, and bad design.¹⁶ In the United States, the reformers' statements advocated obvious construction, simplified designs, and variety.

The trend toward diversity within each suite, therefore, was the result both of the emphasis on the picturesque and the impact of the English reformers' ideas. It was no coincidence that the number of forms in suites increased during the 1880s, nor that suites appeared with each piece upholstered in a different color.

But there was tension between variety and harmony in home decoration. An 1890s furniture catalogue stated:

To furnish a house make up your mind exactly as to the wished-for effect of each room before you begin to buy furniture, carpets or curtains, for it is essential that there should be harmony of colors, even if suits of furniture are discarded in favor of odd bits. But be careful that in your aim at the unstudied you do not run to the extreme of an inharmonious whole.¹⁷

The concept of the picturesque combined complexity and unity. A balance had to be maintained between the two.

But the emphasis on the picturesque does not explain why the number of pieces included in suites decreased. It

appears that this trend, at least in part, had to do with changes in family structure and architecture. Gwendolyn Wright has shown how observers, in the 1890s,

recognized that social and economic conditions of their time demanded different conceptions of housing and home life: more women wished to work outside the home; the household was changing in size; more goods for the home were being produced by industry; the costs of construction and furniture manufacture were spiralling upward.¹⁸

More space in the house was given over to technology: to heating ducts, plumbing fixtures, and the like. The dropping birth rate meant that families were smaller. And there was the slowly spreading belief that the crowded interiors of late nineteenth-century homes were not only dowdy and inefficient, but unhealthy.¹⁹ Manufacturers responded to all these forces by producing suites of five, three, or even two pieces.

But discussion of the specific factors operating to cause change in the late nineteenth century must be supplemented by the introduction of more general theories of cultural change. H. G. Barnett, who was quoted earlier, believes that change is a part of every culture through the individuals who constitute it. He states:

Every individual is basically innovative for two reasons. No two stimuli to which he reacts are ever identical. . . . The second reason for diversified reactions is that no one ever entirely or minutely duplicates his responses to what he regards as the same stimulus. Inevitably an organism is altered by its own responses; it is not the

same after responding as it was before.²⁰

Those things which actually change within a culture must be ideas, according to Barnett: "In no other way can there be continuity in a cultural tradition, for chairs, tables, and governmental forms neither beget nor cause their like."²¹ Internal and external conditions, incentives for change, innovative processes, and mechanisms for acceptance and rejection all play a part.

Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi has observed how change creates pleasure for humans, without regard to content: "Novel stimuli provide enjoyable sensations to a nervous system that is burdened by repetitive information."²² The changes in parlor suites, thus, were part of an inevitable process, as Barnett shows, but it was a process which often proved to be enjoyable to the people involved, simply because of the novelty.

A provocative theory advanced by David E. Wright and Robert E. Snow addresses the specific case of technologically-advanced societies. New products must constantly appear on the market in such a society.

We [the members of American culture] believe that progress and individual completion--long the twin goals of Western civilization--are achieved through the consumption of goods and services. . . . We labor to consume, and we consume in excess of need in order to feel successful, powerful, sexual or just adequate. Our culture requires that we feel

and act this way.²³

Consumption becomes a ritual because it is the means by which the individual is transformed into a different and better person. This pattern of expenditure

was born when growth and even stability could only be achieved through extranecessitous consumption, that is, with consumption that was no longer equated with personal survival, or even comfort, but with fantasy. From then on consumption had to be mystified and made obligatory.²⁴

Certainly consumption would be enhanced if new and novel products were continually appearing on the market. Wright and Snow date the introduction of this cultural pattern into the United States to the beginning of the twentieth century.²⁵ Recent work by social historians, however, proposes that the "elaboration of material life," especially for women, occurred over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.²⁶ The conclusion is that rituals of consumption appeared long before 1900, and is supported by the evidence of parlor suites. There was an emphasis on novelty in design and a constant stream of new suites appearing on the market throughout the period under study. A large furniture purchase generally is one which occurs infrequently in an individual's life and usually after much consideration. It seems unlikely that a family would have purchased more than two parlor suites in its lifetime, and possibly only one, relying on re-upholstering to rejuvenate it periodically. Yet the ritual of consumption may have had

its greatest impact on newly-formed households. Additional research may reveal whether young families aspired to new parlor suites, or whether they were content to inherit suites, or use a mixture of furniture.

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

¹H. G. Barnett, Innovation: The Basis of Cultural Change (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1953), p. 57.

²"American Industries - No. 57," Scientific American n.s. 153 (October 9, 1980): 229.

³Kenneth L. Ames, "Grand Rapids Furniture at the Time of the Centennial," in Winterthur Portfolio 10, ed. Ian M. G. Quimby (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1975), p. 35.

⁴Kenneth L. Ames, "Sitting in the (Néo-Grec) Style," Nineteenth Century 2 (Autumn 1976): 54.

⁵Mary Jean Smith Madigan, "The Influence of Charles Locke Eastlake on American Furniture Manufacture, 1870-90," in Winterthur Portfolio 10, ed. Ian M. G. Quimby (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1975), p. 10.

⁶E. H. Gombrich, The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1979), pp. 168-69.

⁷Madigan, "Eastlake," p. 2.

⁸Rodris Roth, "The Colonial Revival and 'Centennial Furniture'," Art Quarterly 27 (1964): 76.

⁹Richard Krautheimer, "Introduction to an 'Iconography of Medieval Architecture,'" Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes 5 (1942): 14.

¹⁰Holton, Parlor Furniture, pp. 10-11, 14-15.

¹¹Butler Brothers, Supplementary Catalogue, p. 3.

¹²Carroll L. V. Meeks, The Railroad Station: An Architectural History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), p. 4.

¹³*Ibid.*, p.5.

- 14Ibid., p. 5.
- 15Ella Rodman Church, How to Furnish a Home (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1882), p. 60.
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- 17Hudson River Furniture Co., From "Factory to Fireside" (Kingston, N.Y.: n.p., [1890s]), inside back cover.
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- 19Ibid., p. 165.
- 20Barnett, Innovation, pp. 19-20.
- 21Ibid., p. 11.
- 22Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: The Experience of Play in Work and Games (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975), p. 25.
- 23David E. Wright and Robert E. Snow, "Consumption as Ritual in the High Technology Society," in Rituals and Ceremonies in Popular Culture, ed. Ray B. Browne (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1980), p. 327.
- 24Ibid.
- 25Ibid.
- 26Carson and Walsh, "Material Life," p. 5.

CONCLUSIONS

This study, through empirical means, showed that the concept of a parlor suite, while flexible in certain ways, had very specific connotations in late nineteenth-century America. All of the following things had to be present for a grouping of factory-made furniture to be considered a parlor suite: (1) two or more pieces of furniture, (2) a sofa, (3) exclusively seating furniture, (4) visually related furniture, (5) spring upholstery, and (6) associated with the parlor. Furthermore, suites were expected to provide the consumer with options in style, decoration, and price.

Examination of the characteristics of suites, with the goal of reconstructing social meanings, revealed that suites represented sociability, wealth and/or individuality. Within American society, the presence of reference groups, as defined by Shibutani and others, explained why the social meaning of a suite could vary from one owner to another. A study by Lizabeth Cohen, for example, demonstrated that for working-class owners of suites the suite was a symbol only of wealth.

The changes in suites which occurred between 1871 and 1901 pointed up the flexibility of the "suite" concept. The style of the suite and number and type of furniture forms included in suites changed radically over the years. The work of H. G. Barnett underscored the constant presence of innovation, in a general sense, in any culture. Specific circumstances also fostered change in nineteenth-century America, among them a new idea of beauty grounded in the picturesque, the philosophy of the English reform movement, demographic and architectural shifts, and a belief held by many individuals that the consumption of material goods was a means to transform and improve themselves.

From 1871 to 1901, parlor suites aided in the communication of social messages about the wealth and sociability of their owners, as demonstrated by the continuity of characteristics which conveyed this information. The variety of designs available at any one time, in addition, enabled the purchasers to express their individuality and personal taste. Over time, innovation in parlor suite design reflected shifts in cultural ideas about beauty and usage. The appearance of living room suites at the turn of the century signaled a change in attitude so radical that it could not be accommodated within the concept of the parlor suite, and instead transformed the concept.

While the causes of continuity and change for these artifacts may never be completely understood, the physical results are still evident, if only in the pages of furniture catalogues. What was once familiar and unremarkable furniture has become, for later generations, another sherd in an above-ground archeological dig.

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APPENDIX

CATALOGUES AND PRICE LISTS IN THE SAMPLE

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*tabulated as a New York catalogue as the majority of the
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