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“NOVELTY IN ENTERTAINING...EASILY AND ARTISTICALLY ARRANGED”: MIDDLE-CLASS WOMEN AND THEMED PARTIES IN AMERICA, 1880-1915

by

Jennifer Jo Hammond

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

Spring 1997

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ABSTRACT

At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, American middle-class women frequently read about and participated in elaborate themed parties. The enthusiasm for these themed parties reflected general Victorian cultural preferences for methods of symbolic communication through objects, an aesthetic of elaborate visual detail, and a partiality to imitation and theatricality. However, the emphasis on both artisticness and novelty in prescriptive literature relating to themed parties reveals that themed parties also mediated between traditional and modern conceptions of female roles. Although not all middle-class women hosted or attended themed parties, a large proportion were exposed through the popular press and commercial merchandising to the symbolic language communicated by the parties and the messages about womanhood that they conveyed.
In 1912, a hostess eager for new entertaining ideas might have opened her recently published copy of *The Book of Parties and Pastimes* to the description by Mary Dawson and Emma Paddock Telford of a “Parlor Snow Frolic.” Dawson and Telford provided detailed instructions for a party guaranteed to win accolades from guests for its ingenuity and daintiness. From chandeliers, picture frames and walls hung with cotton snow and tinsel icicles to white and silver confections on the refreshment table, every aspect of the suggested festivity emphasized the theme of the evening. After guests enjoyed the vision of a house transformed into a wintry scene by walls hung with “snowy” pine branches and sheets tacked to the floor for snowdrifts (not to mention a snowman constructed from barrels, pillows, and cotton batting), the entertainment could begin. The guests could amuse themselves with competitions of tossing “snowballs” (rubber balls dipped in flour or chalk) at targets and, while blindfolded, cutting down “icicles” (peppermint twists hung on silver ribbons); the winners might receive calendars decorated with silvery “frost.” Guests could also hunt for paper snowflakes cut in halves, with the participant matching the most halves receiving a snowball-shaped candy box. Those excelling at mental challenges might prefer a quiz of snow-related questions written on white tissue paper and crumpled up to resemble snowballs.

After all this exertion the guests could be presented with a table that looked as if the snow in question had descended. According to Dawson and Telford, a white tablecloth laden with glass and silver dishes and a centerpiece of white mums or a white-frosted cake might sparkle under a “snowball” of white flowers hung above the table on a white ribbon or silver cord. White candles with shades of silver filigree, white cardboard trimmed with
tinsel, or white silk with crystal beads, depending on the hostess’ pocketbook, might light the scene. The food, too, would match the occasion. The menu called for cream of oyster soup served in white bowls upon silver lace doilies as a first course. Pineapple or Swiss cheese sandwiches wrapped in silver foil, cold sliced chicken, and stuffed eggs followed, with a concluding course of white ice cream served in white tissue-paper cases fringed with silver tinsel, white bonbons and cakes iced in white. As a remembrance of the spectacular occasion, the guest would go home with a favor which had been conveniently concealed in the pillow-and-barrel snowman.¹

The modern reader may at first feel disbelief at the elaboration suggested for a parlor party. Surely this must be an isolated example of Victorian excess-in-excess like the heavily ornamented chairs and extraordinarily varied sets of silverware that provoke reactions ranging from disgust to amazement in museum visitors. Perhaps it is an instance of prescriptive literature establishing goals to which its readers are supposed to aspire but which they can never actually reach. Further investigation, however, reveals contemporary descriptions like this excerpt from the diary of Isabella Maud Rittenhouse, a teenager living in Cairo, Illinois:

Well our Milkmaid Luncheon was a jolly success. Hardly seemed any trouble either. On Friday we made three cakes, a white mountain, chocolate and Neapolitan, and Mama made a great bowl of chicken salad. Then in the afternoon I went down town with Blanche and got bread at the Woman’s Exchange for our sandwiches...and the ham was boiled Friday, of course. Then yesterday there was only coffee and ice cream to make and brown bread, plates, etc. to wipe and arrange, and pickles to slice.

The house looked sweet...when Mama came home...you ought to have seen her expression!--for the hall was alive with chatty groups...and the stairs were profusely sprinkled with pretty girls, flower-bedecked....We talked and talked...and then we danced, too.²

Isabella Rittenhouse as well as Mary Dawson and Emma Telford participated in a national enthusiasm for themed parties among middle-class women that lasted from the late 1880s until the First World War. The parties featured decorations, food, entertainment, favors,
and sometimes even costumes meant to evoke a particular event, period, holiday, or mood.³

Borrowing from current issues, tastes, and fads for inspiration, the turn-of-the-century hostess constructed elaborate environments for her guests that had been planned down to the color of the paper napkins and which appealed to all the senses to reinforce the central motif of the festive occasion. Most major women's magazines of the period published instructions for giving such parties. A "clover luncheon," a "popcorn party," a "paper party," a "progressive rainbow party," a "seven ages of Man party," a "purple and gray function," and a "Midwinter feast," for example, all appeared in print⁴ A large number of books, ranging from _Home Games and Parties_ by Mrs. Hamilton Mott (1891) to _Bright Ideas for Entertaining_ by Mrs. Herbert B. Linscott (1905), also devoted their pages to ideas for themed parties.

Evidence of this enthusiasm emerges not just in prescriptive literature or in scattered personal accounts but in commercial records as well. A number of manufacturers offered wares appropriate for themed entertainments. B. Shackman & Co. sold a wide variety of party goods that included paper cases and baskets for serving ice cream and candy, favors and favor boxes, napkins printed with holiday designs, confetti, tally cards for keeping score at card parties, dance programs, and noisemakers.⁵ Dennison Manufacturing Company could provide crepe and tissue papers as well as tags for Christmas gifts, paper garlands, and decorations such as mica "snow" and sprays of artificial holly. The pamphlets which the company issued explaining the uses of tissue paper eventually evolved into a full-fledged party-giving magazine which lasted about a decade.⁶ The United States Playing Card Company distributed decks of cards, while MacCalla and Co.'s products included novelty candy boxes, tinsel skeins, and fairy wings for costumes and charades.⁷ Along with fireworks, Masten & Wells offered Japanese lanterns, banners, bunting and
drapery, paper rosettes and fans, Japanese scrolls and umbrellas, and imported bonbons; competitor American Flag Company retailed holiday and carnival flags, papier-mâché decorations, festooning, paper lanterns and fans, and colorful silk ribbons. The Brainerd & Armstrong Silk Company sold silks and patterns for embroidering fancy party linens of the type frequently recommended in the prescriptive literature, while the Beistle factory turned out "honeycomb" paper decorations for a variety of occasions. The trade catalogues of these companies support the premise that themed parties were given often enough around the beginning of the twentieth century to be highly profitable.

In creating themed parties, middle-class women manipulated objects and materials to create new worlds in their parlors and dining rooms. Under their hands seasons changed, long-dead historical figures walked abroad again, and distances of thousands of miles disappeared. A home could become Japan or Ireland, Mount Vernon or Plymouth Plantation, the realm of cupids or goblins. The laws of reality could be suspended, with boiled eggs turning out to be blancmanges and cabbages concealing buried treasure of chicken-salad sandwiches; ordinary things like apples, peanuts, or the color orange could become entertainment, refreshment and decoration. Or the home could simply be a place of beauty where aesthetics reigned to a greater extent than they ever could in normal living space. Linens, flowers, food and favors all matched in perfect harmony; literate quotations on the place cards and flowers draped on the chandelier established an air of refinement. The talent of the hostess recreated places of beauty too far away to be experienced at first hand such as the woodland or the seaside. The beautiful and the novel reigned as the ideals of aspiration, expressed through the choices of the hostess.

The extraordinary orchestration of domestic material culture involved in the turn-of-the-century theme party cries out for analysis. Why did descriptions of these elaborate occasions appeal to female readers so greatly that they appear in nearly every popular women's periodical of the period? What messages did authors and readers exchange about
women's roles, duties and aspirations? What cultural subtext lurked beneath pink ice cream and mantels garlanded with pansies? In this essay, I will consider the material components of a theme party as envisioned by the prescriptive writers and, as much as I can, by their readers. I will examine how transient, even frivolous objects could express cultural questions and tensions. Although at first glance insignificant, the choices that women considered and made about creamed chicken and crepe paper reflected the greater cultural matrix of which those small things were a part. Even when left unimplemented, the parties created by the prescriptive writers formed a mental material culture in which readers could participate vicariously. The enormous popularity of these publications and the profitability of the goods associated with them signal that many women participated in or at least read about this fashion. What can we learn about these women from their enthusiasm?

The parties become particularly interesting when one places them in the context of the enormous cultural changes affecting the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. Transitions that had begun before the Civil War gained momentum as the cities expanded, manufacturing replaced farming as the nation's primary economic activity, and immigrants flooded the ports. The speed of life increased dramatically as telephone systems spread, railroads extended into remote areas, and automobiles began to appear on the roads. Mass production and mass marketing made a wider variety of goods available and appealing to a wider variety of people. The phonograph, inexpensive amateur photography, and the earliest movies widened horizons, as did the growing numbers of high schools and universities. Historians have proposed a number of models to explain the period, but they agree that American men and women of the late nineteenth century experienced a far different world than had their parents and grandparents.10

Middle and upper-class women noted changes in their lives as well. More and more women graduated from college and entered careers, although public-school education
and early marriage remained the more common experience. The "Gibson Girl"—athletic, cosmopolitan, well-traveled—became a cultural ideal, contrasting dramatically with the delicate and retiring heroines of past decades. Women participated as professionals or private citizens in the wave of reform which swept the country, pursuing goals from safe milk to female suffrage. For those who stayed at home, technological advances including electricity, canned foods, and the introduction of automobiles, changed the form of housework and standards of domestic care permanently. At the same time, however, many also looked to the past for guidance and eyed innovations with distrust. Debates raged. Should women attend college, have careers, or travel? How would the children, husbands and homes which had traditionally fallen under their care and guidance be affected? Women faced a variety of new choices and expectations for which no cultural precedent existed.

Into this complicated cultural milieu entered the new enthusiasm for theme parties. Is it possible to discover connections between this fashion and the dilemmas that turn-of-the-century women faced? How did the theme party intersect with new demands and old expectations? Why did many women turn to theme parties to fulfill the social roles of entertaining and being entertained or at least consider doing so? Why did popular publications for women, generally quite conservative about changes in women's roles, espouse the parties? This essay will suggest that theme parties represented an acceptable, if not explicitly envisioned, way to deal with this ferment and explores how that mediation took place. Heart-shaped cookies and pink geraniums may not, in isolation, seem significant, but when assembled into a social environment became important tools for dealing with a world in flux.

References to theme parties, defined as social events in which several aspects of the occasion (including invitations, food, decorations, costumes or entertainment) combine to evoke a particular event, period, location, mood, or type of object, began to appear
commonly in the popular press during the 1880s. These themed parties took a wide variety of forms; they could be put on by clubs for the entertainment of the members, hosted by individuals for adults or children, or staged as fund-raisers for charitable organizations. The themed party represented a new variation on the entertaining generally considered an acceptable occupation for ladies.

In fact, middle and upper-class women had given and attended parties for other females or for mixed groups throughout the nineteenth century. Contemporary etiquette books explained how to host and behave at a bewildering variety of functions. For instance, the author of The Social Mirror, a comprehensive etiquette book published in 1888, believed that the book’s readers ought to understand proper form for soirees, matinees, musicales, lawn parties, garden parties, balls, opera and theater parties, dinner parties, weddings, anniversary celebrations, receptions, kettledrums, teas and christenings. Parties also appear frequently in personal papers of the period. Prominent women like Mrs. James G. Blaine, wife of the former vice-president, noted a lively round of dinners, luncheons, teas, and receptions in their diaries and letters, as did more ordinary citizens like Isabella Maud Rittenhouse of Cairo, Illinois and Elsie Sargeant Abbot of Germantown, Pennsylvania. On these occasions women socialized, practiced their best manners, and admired the arrangements provided by their hostesses.

These gatherings established high standards of complexity and elegance for hostesses and made successful partygiving a mark of status within one’s social circle. Novelty could certainly help achieve distinction in these efforts, as could especially beautiful affairs. For instance, in 1882, Godey’s Magazine explained how to make place cards and table favors that would amuse or delight one’s guests. However, until nearly the end of the century, prescriptive literature and guests’ expectations focused chiefly on traditional forms of entertainment enacted tastefully and elegantly. Social advice columns
and etiquette books encouraged hostesses to try to make their parties as perfectly conventional as possible, showing as little visible effort as circumstances permitted and with every participant following proper modes of behavior. Indeed, to have appeared to expended effort on a party counted against a hostess, who as mistress of a perfectly ordered household ought to have been able to manage without any noticeable disturbance to daily routine.

The late 1880s and early 1890s, however, introduced the innovation of the theme party. As author Annie Curd wrote,

"There is at the present time a perfect rage for the 'novel' in all kinds of social entertainments, and if a lady gives a reception, dinner, lunch or tea, there must be something to distinguish it from similar parties given by her friends on former occasions. Years ago the fair hostess tried to 'outdo' all others in the elaborateness of her menu...but now all is changed, and after a simple repast of dainty viands has been planned, she busies her active brain about the serving, planning some new things in this respect, as well as regarding the decoration of her home..."  

Although women continued to give and attend traditional kinds of affairs, they also began to raise the thematic touches which they had occasionally added to a central position.

Inspiration for the idea of orchestrating an entire party around one theme may have trickled down from the wealthy. The industrialization and consolidation of the United States' economy after the Civil War had created a small but widely observed group of extremely rich Americans. Spending the social season in New York City and the summers in Newport, Rhode Island, sending their children on the Grand Tour of Europe and marrying their daughters, suitably clad in the most expensive of French fashions, to European noblemen with less concern for genealogy than their empty pockets, American millionaires became the object of admiration or at least interest to thousands of their countrymen. Descriptions of their clothing, their homes, their travels and the souvenirs they collected, their scandals, their weddings, and most especially their parties appeared in the columns of newspapers and magazines across the nation."
Very wealthy Americans gave parties on the same grandiose scale at which they did everything else. Balls in New York and at Newport involved hundreds of guests and cost many thousands of dollars. The opulent details which reached the newspapers included one dinner at which fish swam in a stream running down the middle of a table and another at which guests dug with miniature silver spades for jewels buried in a sandpile atop the dinner table. Themed parties provided especially appropriate occasions for magnificence. On one occasion, C.K.G. Billings gave a bachelor party with a hunting theme. He transformed the ballroom of a New York restaurant into a wooded glen complete with electric stars twinkling overhead and live birds chirping in the artificial bushes. He arranged for real horses to be brought up in the freight elevator and his guests ate their dinner from horseback, with champagne conveniently provided in their saddlebags. In 1905, life insurance tycoon James Hazen Hyde hosted a ball with the theme of Louis XVI of France’s court. He converted a ballroom into a wing of Versailles, and his guests arrived suitably garbed as courtiers complete with the appropriate jewels. Such extravagance met with criticism as well as admiration; Hyde fled the country after reports of his entertainment led his shareholders to protest and the government to launch an investigation into exactly from where such prodigious funds ($200,000) had been drawn.\(^{18}\)

Some of the popularity of themed events may be ascribed to aspirations to imitate the very wealthy. Like those of many types of popular culture, however, the specific roots of the late Victorian themed party may prove impossible to unearth. One can examine, however, the cultural context which nurtured them and which, when it disappeared after World War I, took with it the unspoken rationales that informed the elaboration incredible to modern eyes. Themed parties drew on visual and cultural conventions which appear in both the written and material records of that era. These records reveal that Victorians related to objects in a way that has become alien to their descendants and which historians have only begun to analyze. Consideration of late Victorian cultural assumptions lends
insight into why themed parties flourished around the beginning of the twentieth century, even if their exact origins can never be determined.

First, Victorian Americans believed that objects contained immense communicative power. John Kasson has observed that the enterprise of interpreting signs and their meaning within society consumed enormous energies during the nineteenth century. Although his analysis focused on behaviors as signs, the same is true of objects as signs. Objects signified, by association, far larger ideas than their physical dimensions might suggest. Of course, this theoretical concept applies far more widely than the late nineteenth century. However, the Victorians expressed especially great interest in what Katherine C. Grier has referred to as "non-verbal kinds of expressive 'languages' structured by 'grammars.'" They specialized in conversing symbolically through objects, whether particular varieties of flowers in a bouquet or corners turned down on a visiting card.

Thus, to a hostess and guest white canvas on the floor at a "Snowball Party" conveyed not a mere imitation of a snowdrift, falling far short of reality, but a material signifier meant to invoke a chain of associations with winter's chill. As hostesses multiplied these concrete symbols, they would assist the guests in mentally establishing themselves within the themed universe, which could range from something as simple as a particular color to an entire historical era. The party became a joint exercise in creation between hostess and guests, who spoke the same language of objects and imagination.

If a hostess provided a variety of mental and sensory stimuli partly to multiply chains of association for her guests, she probably also did so because of a general appreciation that existed for detail, especially visual detail. Historians of the period suggest that visual sophistication increased dramatically during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as chromolithographs, photography and eventually movies exposed people to ever more specific and accurate images. Photographs as well as design books of the period confirm that Victorian taste in decorating leaned toward the intricate, with layers
upon layers of ornament. In fact, Katherine Grier perceives a "sensibility of refinement" rooted in fine detail and elaborately handled shapes and surfaces that profoundly shaped the way Americans arranged their material surroundings. This visual orientation and appreciation affected other aspects of the culture as well. For instance, late nineteenth-century cuisine as taught in cookbooks and cooking schools focused heavily on appearance. It celebrated garnishes, delicately fancy salads, and a general emphasis on looks, epitomized by the genteelly blanketing white sauce, over taste. Themed parties also depended on visual sophistication; to perceive and appreciate the nuances of an orange menu or a house where all the decorations used a heart motif, to make the translation between the observed and the implied, required properly trained guests.

Milo Orvell's examination of the nineteenth-century "culture of imitation" also provides insight into the popularity of the themed party. Orvell argues that the great transition between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was between a celebration of imitation or representation and an allegiance to authenticity. He contends that a tendency to frame reality within an artificial or theatrical structure dominated popular culture during the nineteenth century. Machine technologies enabled the production of all sorts of facsimiles, from silver-plated tablewares to chromolithographs of the great art of Europe. Although the Victorians used these objects in pursuit of status, they also actively delighted in the materials' possibilities. For instance, silver manufacturers sold expensive tablewares that mimicked, nearly to life, subjects ranging from polar bears clambering on icebergs to a humble plate covered with a napkin and holding soda crackers—all in precious metal. As Orvell observes, "...one sees repeatedly a reveling in the artifice of materials and a love of playing true against false, natural against artificial. Such clashes were part of a shared popular aesthetic that worked by confusing and delighting the senses and incidentally paying homage to the transformations of the artisan."
If furniture painted with a wood-grain pattern and silver that simulated textiles represented the commercialization of this culture, theme parties demonstrated that it permeated amateur, domestic circles as well. Indeed, theme parties seem to be the epitome of the culture of imitation. Hostesses expected that their guests would delight in the artful representations of other places or times created by the decorations, food and costumes. Few sought authenticity. Rather, the thoroughgoing use of imitation and the sense of fun and wonder that it engendered by its extension far beyond everyday limits contributed to the mood of festivity that a party was meant to evoke. The status achieved by the hostess, based on the awe and delight that her efforts evoked in her guests, related to the lengths to which she was willing to go to create her environment, to the levels to which she raised her imitation, and not to the reality that she replicated.

In brief, then, the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theme party depended on a particular complex of cultural patterns for its existence and for the ability of its participants to understand and engage in it. This complicated milieu nurtured a form of entertaining with a bewildering variety of themes and variations. The common element, and one that distinguished the period, was the lengths to which hostesses went to ensure that the guests experienced the theme idea in as many ways and in as much detail as possible. Before the 1890s, popular opinion would have considered the effort vulgar; after the first World War it would become a humorous symbol of Victorian excess. Between approximately 1890 and 1915, however, women frequently turned to a themed experience, carried out to great lengths of material coordination, to amuse and impress their guests.

Postwar advice authorities, on the other hand, focused on providing a social experience for guests with limited effort. Simplicity became an ideal as contemporary critics noted changes. As one author wrote,

The hostess of to-day has the natural trend towards simplification to thank for many things. She is an emancipated person in comparison with her counterpart of
the “gay nineties” or of the early nineteen hundreds. In those eras, entertaining was synonymous with elaboration, and a dinner-party was an affair of eight or nine courses to be approached only in a spirit of determination, by hostess and guest alike. Then, indeed, did the setting of the table present a pretty problem and the menu put a tax on the powers of the most experienced hostess. But, with the general simplifying of modern life, elaboration has disappeared from our tables as it has from our clothes. Simplicity has become a criterion of every phase of chic, and it is the qualities that simplicity engenders—ease, naturalness, lack of ostentation—that make for distinguished entertaining today.²⁸

Sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd noted in their study *Middletown* that the variety of entertainment described in 1890s newspapers, including “trolley parties, progressive tiddley-winks, shoe socials...[and] lemon squeezes” had shrunk to card parties and formal dances.²⁹

Although women continued to give themed parties, they approached the occasions differently. A “Hawaiian Luncheon” described by Marguerite Maddox in 1928 in *Ladies' Home Journal* focused on authentic food and appropriate table settings rather than intricate arrangements. The author suggested salmon lomi, chicken with spinach and coconut, banana and coconut pudding, avocado salad, grape-juice punch, pineapple water ice, and Alexander cake as a menu, while the table would be decorated with orange crepe paper piled high with leaves and tropical fruit. Hawaiian music on the phonograph, leis hung on the chairs, and “native”-looking dishes completed the occasion.³⁰ Although this luncheon still would have required work on the part of the hostess, it looked for its effects to easily purchased objects and authentic details rather than to an exuberant embrace of imitation.

While the form in which the turn-of-the-century theme party existed reflected the age which bred it, so did the ideals to which its hostesses were supposed to aspire. Authors of prescriptive literature on entertaining focused on two ideals when instructing their readers on entertaining in the modern age. First, artistic taste. Authors frequently
described the parties which they suggested as "artistic," "dainty," "elegant," or with other adjectives that implied aesthetic merit. For instance, the publication *Art & decoration in crepe & tissue paper*, produced by the Dennison Manufacturing Company to help sell its paper goods, described a "pretty Rose Tea.... [that] would make an extremely dainty affair and be a great source of pleasure to hostess and friends alike." An article in *Godey's Magazine* lauded a "violet luncheon" as "exquisitely dainty and graceful." Mrs. Burton Kingsley described a "Fan Luncheon" similarly: "Anything more dainty and artistic can scarcely be imagined." Decorations, favors, even food could evoke aesthetic appreciation.

Artistic parties appealed for several reasons. For several decades, middle-class women had, urged on by popular periodicals, undertaken the task of creating and orchestrating beauty around them. *Godey's Magazine*, for instance, taught women to create objects like embroidered mottoes or beaded wall-pockets; *Ladies' Home Journal* offered advice on decoration and architecture as well as reproductions of great works of art to ornament the home. Partly, these initiatives represented one facet of the popular theory that environment shaped character. According to many nineteenth-century authorities, beauty would exalt the soul and make better people. Benefactors who opened art museums hoped to uplift visitors from the grimy round of daily life and the pettiness of character that accompanied it. Reformers who agitated for parks and green spaces hoped that natural beauty would ameliorate the strains of urban living. Aesthetic Movement architects and designers intended their work to introduce proper design principles into the home, naturally improving the inhabitants.

These theories trickled down through the popular press to the middle-class public. Since a woman's primary duty, according to nineteenth-century rhetoric, was to mold good character from the unformed or even dissolute material entrusted to her, creating a beautiful
home represented both a resource and a responsibility for her. A: an anonymous columnist for Godey's Magazine wrote, “The fashionable fad of to-day is Art...and we have ‘gone in for’ it with the vigor and enthusiasm that are characteristic of our modern make-up....Over the world of women the modern art movement has had full sway....The cultivation of taste and the worship of the beautiful are tremendous strides toward a higher civilization....this great art crusade...began with the beautifying of the home.”

Partly, too, the expectation that women would beautify lay in societal beliefs about the female character. Women were supposed to be naturally dainty, delicate, and oriented toward the aesthetically pleasing; men were rough, unpolished, and best-suited for the practical problems of the working world. Women wished to beautify the world around them, according to nineteenth-century thinking, as characteristically as they wanted to mother their children. This belief worked in conjunction with the very real constraints placed upon women's opportunities outside the domestic arena to encourage aesthetic creativity inside the home. A middle-class woman of the late nineteenth century who possessed artistic impulses would generally see women who flourished outside the home decried as unnatural and a blight upon society, while women who limited their efforts to appropriate circles received praise and encouragement. Although by the early twentieth century these strictures had eased somewhat, especially for younger women, the old expectations clung tenaciously. In general, women were expected to want to create beauty, and, equally, they had very few options other than the home in which to exercise their abilities.

At the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, middle-class women frequently heard that they ought to enjoy and create food, homes, and clothing described as “dainty,” “elegant,” or “artistic.” The parties that authors portrayed also reflected those ideals. Significantly, “artistic” parties were among the first theme parties to
be widely mentioned in the popular press, and even the social arbiters who frowned on “novelty” allowed that hostesses might give artistic occasions with propriety. Artistic taste as applied to a theme party, however, remains a surprisingly slippery concept to define or illustrate. Contemporaries generally associated it with an event that displayed aesthetic appeal, especially of the particularly dainty and delicate type associated with women. This could mean introducing motifs considered feminine and elegant, such as flowers or ribbons, or recreating an environment on a femininely miniature scale. It could also mean integrating the party visually—using one color or design to weave different rooms, architectural elements, or even activities together. Victorian aesthetic preferences applauded the control and integration of visual detail as an artistic tour de force; the theme party provided a unique forum for its expression.

If the penchant for “artistic” parties represented cultural and gender ideals which had long been accepted in America, a simultaneous taste for “novelty” parties reflected the enthusiasm for newness and innovation which characterized the period. In the literature describing theme parties, the adjective “novel” comes up again and again. In the introduction to her “Dame Curtsey” party book, Ellye Howell Glover wrote, “[this volume responds to]...the constant demand of ‘something new, something different’ that every hostess desires for her parties whether large or small.” Edith Townsend Everett agreed, writing “...in these days, when the most unique entertainment is the one to receive the greatest...approval from those who cater to society’s needs, a novel affair is in the nature of a new-found joy. Therefore the description of one of the oddest, yet most delightful gatherings imaginable, will not come amiss to hostesses in search of variety.” Specific parties were recommended as novel solutions to the problem of what to do. For instance, Mary Dawson and Emma Paddock Telford argued that, “A Dutch party...affords great scope for novelty and for any originality the entertainer may possess.” Mrs. Hamilton Mott pointed out that “Novelty parties, such as ‘Color Teas,’ Frost, Harlequin or
Pantomime parties, tableaux, which reproduce pictures familiar to the company; living statuary, in color or white; guessing tableaux or amateur theatricals, though involving considerable previous preparation, carry the evening’s enjoyment along with very little danger of failure.⁴⁰

A novel party sought to take guests by surprise, amuse them with alternatives to ordinary entertainment, or amaze them by the ingenuity of its imaginative theme or the cleverness of its execution. For instance, Edith Townsend Everett described a “Masquerade Luncheon” in the 1896 *Ladies’ Home Journal* in which none of the food was quite as it seemed. Oranges seemed to be tomato salad; macaroni appeared to be asparagus.

When, the bouillon in thin egg-shell cups was tasted and the wondering guests discovered that it was tea instead of the usual beef broth, the meaning of the word masquerade as applied to this luncheon suddenly dawned upon them all...the excitement and novelty of this unique meal now beginning to make itself felt, and producing among us all just the effect the hostess had been hoping for.⁴¹

The novelty lay in the confusion about what the theme meant, and, when discovered, the pleasure in how well the hostess carried it out along with the fun of trying to figure out exactly what was being served to the guests.

Of course, not everyone approved of novelty. Indeed, some considered it vulgar. Christine Terhune Herrick, daughter of conservative author Marion Harland, argued,

> The experienced hostess will introduce no novelties at her dinners; no chafing-dish courses or “surprises” of any kind. She will not have tawdry or over-elaborate menu or dinner cards, and, above all, will not place beside the plate of each guest a “souvenir” of the occasion...Never strive to achieve a novelty in napkin-folding. This is done only in hotels, restaurants, cafes, etc. Avoid the use of original menu cards; they savor of Bohemian feasts, ‘stag parties,’ or hotel dinners, and are out of place on the conventional table...⁴²

*Godey's Magazine* differentiated between “the people who aspire to stylish elegance” and “the stylish folks, who represent a wholly different faction of society, [and] affect all
manner of oddities,” and noted of a rosebud luncheon that “only folks of very idle ways are apt to follow such fashions.”

Still, novelty appealed to most hostesses for several reasons. By the beginning of the twentieth century, a hostess had to compete with numerous other activities for guests’ attention. The custom of elaborate entertaining established earlier in the nineteenth century continued, but by the 1890s hostesses competed with many other amusement options. The late nineteenth century witnessed what scholars have labeled “a leisure revolution,” in which a variety of new leisure activities became available to Americans of all classes. Driven by mass production and the introduction of new technologies, the leisure revolution created innovative choices for entertainment at the same time that a society becoming increasingly industrialized recognized relaxation as a necessary supplement to the formal work environment. As Donna Braden has pointed out, this morally accepted leisure still tended to be quite structured, especially for women, and geared toward social advancement or improving oneself culturally or spiritually. Appreciation for simple enjoyment came second.

Middle-class Americans continued to participate in traditional forms of recreation. At home they might read, garden, do handwork, play or sing music or participate with family and friends in parlor games and theatricals. Public activities included religious or community gatherings from strawberry festivals to camp meetings, concerts or plays, or picnics and other outdoor events. However, Americans might also choose one of the exciting new options available. The phonograph and player piano brought a wider variety of music into the home than most families could provide themselves, while amateur photography offered vivid visual entertainment. People could also participate in a wide variety of organizations being formed to accommodate any interest from patriotic genealogy to choral singing. Fraternal organizations grew particularly quickly and in their turn sponsored a variety of parties and entertainments. Newly popular sports like roller-
skating, bicycling, tennis and golf provided physical exercise to both women and men, singly and in groups. Novel forms of public entertainment also developed. Vaudeville and other types of theatrical performances, traveling companies conducting Wild West shows, circuses, and Chatauquas, carnivals and their more elaborate form, the amusement park, and the newest technological advance, the movies, all opened new horizons.

The new kinds of leisure activities raised the standards of what hostesses had to provide to interest their guests. Modern entertainments stimulated senses and imaginations and showed people a wider variety of experience, all in the name of fun, than ever before. Amusement parks, phonographs, and movies served, at least temporarily, to bring exoticism and adventure to ordinary people and trained them to expect variety and novelty. Travel by train, bicycle, or automobile exposed middle-class Americans to new places and people; photographs, lectures, and inexpensive publications shared the experience with those who had to stay at home. Turn-of-the-century guests became harder to impress; after all, what is the effect of a finely designed dinner table when one has witnessed the orchestration of Coney Island? Hostesses turned to novelty to achieve their effects. Then, too, the very desire of hostesses to create overt surprise and amazement in their guests was a product of this same stimulating atmosphere of leisure. Earlier in the nineteenth century the ideal hostess created a social occasion so utterly grounded in common practice that surprises denoted vulgarity of invention rather than a pleasant change. The belief that one's guests would not be satisfied unless awed or shocked evolved from the turn-of-the-century preference for wonder.

Novelty as a characteristic of parties is easier to identify than artistic taste, although it has its own subtleties. Novelty could simply mean newness, a theme or decorating idea or way of making sandwiches which no one had thought of before. However, it also encompassed shock or surprise—food whose taste turned out to be vastly at odds with its appearance—or its associated emotion, humor. Verbal and visual puns, many quite subtle,
often riddled the turn-of-the-century party at which the hostess looked to novelty for entertainment. The same enthusiasm for visual and intellectual complexity which bred Victorian decorating and purple prose nurtured a taste for complicated party games or decorations which, when properly interpreted, tickled the sense of humor with a sudden twist.

In short, novelty and artistic taste intertwined in the parties that prescriptive literature described. The ideal event would encompass both qualities, enchanting guests with elegance and aesthetic appeal while simultaneously awing them with the wonders achieved. Novelty and artistic taste, apparently so far apart on a spectrum of cultural preferences, shaded into each other subtly. A “Daisy Luncheon” was thoroughly artistic by late Victorian standards. Wreaths of flowers for the guests to wear, table decorations weaving white, yellow, and green ribbon and fresh daisies into a beautiful setting, and chains of daisies about the room exemplify Victorian ideas of elegance. Yet cakes iced with daisies to match the decor and the idea of holding a daisy-drawing contest afterward fall more into the category of the new and interesting rather than the artistic.50 An invitation written on birch bark to evoke the natural beauty of the outdoors could be artistic, yet compared to the traditional practice of writing invitations on notepaper, it was also novel. It often becomes impossible to separate the two tendencies when analyzing the turn-of-the-century theme party.

The marketplace catered to both preferences with the party goods that merchants retailed. Carter, Rice and Co. sold invitations and dance programs in designs ranging from wedding doves to firemen. Their sample books show cards displaying country homes “frosted” with artificial snow or dainty flower designs accented with cutwork lace.51 (Figure 1). The delicacy and feminine elegance of the stationery would have corresponded exactly with the kind of “artistic” occasion described by the prescriptive writers. Alternatively, the Dennison paper goods company offered a variety of novel, humorous
patterns in its 1904 paper-napkin catalogue. The two illustrated (Figure 2) show a card motif appropriate for a card party and a design of Japanese women playing ping-pong that might have been purchased for a Ping-Pong Party like the one proposed by Mrs. Herbert B. Linscott. The sense of fun conveyed by the playing cards and the humor of table napkins decorated with ping-pong paddles, an object usually confined to the playroom, would have transmitted an agreeable sense of novelty.

To implement artistic taste and novelty, hostesses created new variations on elements of entertaining that had already existed using objects that could either be purchased or manufactured at home. Generally they did not invent wholly new structures or activities for their themed parties, preferring instead to adapt previously existing conventions to their circumstances. For instance, the design of the invitation set the tone for the whole occasion, inducing curiosity and wonder from the moment the guest opened the envelope. Although the etiquette of invitations had become less formal during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the practicalities of a world without telephones in general use and the remnant of older expectations required written invitations for gatherings other than the most casual. The invitation served as a gateway of sorts, setting the tone for the event and establishing the credentials of the party before the guests ever set foot over the hostess’ threshold. For instance, the invitation designed by Elsie Sargeant Abbot for her dancing party and preserved in her scrapbook reflected Abbot’s artistic talent—she filled her scrapbook with sketches and drawings—as well as the elegance she sought. She folded paper into a complicated flower shape, hand-colored the invitation, and lettered it in gold ink, demonstrating her familiarity with and participation in current aesthetics. (Figure 3).

Most commonly, party literature suggested decorating invitations with art that implied the theme of the occasion. Violets painted on violet-scented paper signified a “Violet Party.” Invitations in gold ink on green cardboard cut into the shapes of harps or shamrocks meant St. Patrick’s Day. Or, more powerfully exploiting material symbolism,
invitations could incorporate objects or materials suggestive of the event. Invitations for a Japanese card party could be written on rice paper or on notes placed in the hands of Japanese dolls. A Fern Lunch Party could be announced with invitations with tiny ferns pasted upon them or an Indian Card Party with notes written on birch bark.

Ingenious invitations established the novelty of the occasion and the creativity of the hostess. A parody of the Declaration of Independence would introduce a Fourth of July dinner: “When in the course of social events, it becomes our privilege to furnish an evening’s entertainment to our friends, and it is our desire to promote their happiness, we do solemnly declare that we will give a “Declaration of Independence” dinner on the evening of July the Fourth...” Invitations might also be part of the entertainment, tantalizing the guests with suggestions about what was to occur or presenting a puzzle to be deciphered. For a “Ball Without Dancing,” in which refreshments, games, and decorations were all based on spheres, one might use an invitation written like that of the usual dancing party but with “Danceless Ball” written where “Dancing” would be inserted. The guests would have to wonder what to expect until the party solved the mystery.

Decorations, too, could cater to both novelty and aesthetic appeal. Hostesses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries commonly provided elaborate decorations for parties, drawing on fresh and artificial flowers as well as greens, candles, and commercially available goods like tissue paper and table favors. Etiquette books frequently addressed the question of tasteful and elegant decorations, as did columns in ladies’ magazines. For instance, when discussing decorations for Christmas, a Godsey's Magazine columnist wrote, “‘Beauty is its own excuse for being’ and everything 'pays' that gratifies the artistic taste or serves to elevate it.” In the 1890s, the Ladies' Home Journal published a monthly column on table and room decorations, complete with
photographic examples, and even held a competition for the best ideas submitted by readers.

A hostess could create artistic decorations in several ways. One could coordinate essentially different rooms, objects, or functions into a coherent whole by the tasteful use of unifying colors or motifs. The "Fern Luncheon" described by Mrs. Hamilton Mott suggested ferns massed on the piazza, along railings, in the corners of the porch, and in the hall; inside the house the theme would continue with ferns on dressing tables, mirrors, and mantels. Ferns would appear on the lampshades and, in the dining room, in the corners and on the mantels and walls. A white damask cloth with a fern motif would showcase the bunches of ferns tied with ribbons that occupied the corners of the table as well as the center doily embroidered with ferns and a centerpiece of a glass bowl filled with ferns. Plates set on mats of ferns and illuminated by white candles with green shades would complete the artistic effect.\textsuperscript{62} In a culture which valued the mastery of visual detail, a thoroughly integrated decorating scheme deserved the highest accolades.

Decorations could also be characterized as artistic if they represented the aesthetic commonly assumed to appeal to women. An "Easter Lily Luncheon," for instance, might display pure white linens on a table with green foliage and a bowl of Easter lilies as a centerpiece. According to the description, long-stemmed lilies radiating from the center of the table would complement cut-glass candy dishes, and white candles in silver or glass sticks with shades resembling water lilies or bobeches of artificial lilies. Favors would consist of lilies filled with lily-of-the-valley blossoms and tucked into wine glasses that were decked with white ribbons displaying the guest’s name lettered in gilt.\textsuperscript{63} Delicate colors, the scent of fresh flowers, silky textures and shimmering glass all contributed to the air of dainty femininity which the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries called artistic.

Decorations could utilize novelty as well. For instance, novel decoration could inspire wonder by transforming an ordinary dwelling into an improbable and exotic
environment. Like the amusement parks becoming common, a decorated house transported guests impossible distances while maintaining a subtext of awe at the hostess’ abilities. For example, for the “Bird Carnival” suggested by Mrs. Herbert Linscott, the hostess was to drape her home in vines, flowers and branches to create a “woodland dell.” Stuffed birds arranged throughout the rooms in nests or on perches would remind guests of the theme, as would caged canaries scattered about. Bird eggs arranged in nests and hung from the gas jets would complete the atmosphere.64

While the “Bird Carnival” decorations meant to illustrate a world which existed only in the hostess’ imagination, other party ideas attempted to miniaturize reality into a party environment. A Japanese May Day Fete compressed the entire Japanese calendar into one house by depicting different flower-themed festivals in different rooms. The mood would be set with bamboo poles (fishing poles pressed into service) crossed over the gate with Japanese lanterns hung from them; more lanterns along the path to the house, outlining the verandah, and suspended in doors and windows would confirm the transition from America to Asia. Inside the house, one room would represent the cherry blossom festival, with tissue-paper blossoms on walls, hung from the chandelier, and even decorating the ladies’ hair. Wisteria would provide the theme for a room done in lavender, while a green and white room would focus on the water lily by using the lily’s leaves and blossoms in a frieze about the room and in a wreath on the table. The centerpiece would evoke Japanese gardening with a centerpiece of bonsai trees and a miniature island. Food, too, would become part of the decorations, with cherry ice, cakes decorated with candied cherries, and cherry phosphate or punch served in the cherry blossom room and chicken, cream cheese, nut or lettuce sandwiches tied with red ribbons and white ice cream in scarlet tissue paper cups for the Japanese national colors and a white cake decorated to resemble the flag of Japan in the water-lily room.65
As the Japanese party illustrates, at the turn of the century hostesses often intended food as much for decoration as for nourishment. Proponents of scientific cooking claimed that attractive food stimulated the salivary glands, easing digestion; others simply enjoyed the pleasure of visually appealing cuisine. At any rate, students at the newly popular cooking schools practiced purely decorative skills such as making vegetable garnishes for platters or creating dainty croquettes out of utilitarian chopped meat. Food became the medium for visual effects, whether artistic or novel, in much the same way as tissue paper or fresh flowers did. In fact, party books frequently suggested shaping the food around the theme of the occasion.

Like decorations or invitations, food could be artistic. In fact, according to Laura Shapiro, in the late nineteenth century one frequently heard the comment, “It is too artistic to eat!” Translated into foodstuffs, “artistic” meant ethereal, sweet foods appropriate to ladies’ delicacy and femininity, with aesthetic qualities emphasized over nourishment. Anything small or pretty fit the qualifications—croquettes, timbales, creamed food in pastry shells or ramekins, or molded desserts. Brussels sprouts became popular because they resembled miniature cabbages. Salads could also be characterized as artistic because they “tidied” the roughness of raw vegetables into an orderly, feminine form. Cookbooks described almost anything served on a lettuce leaf as salad, ranging from squares of frozen cream cheese to “Porcupine Salad” (a pear half with slivered almonds stuck into it). Like croquettes or timbales, salads also attempted to package fruits and vegetables into more artistic forms by stuffing fillings into hollowed tomatoes, banana skins, scooped-out turnips, crackers standing on end, rings cut from red peppers, a circle of hard-boiled eggs, or even a casing of ice. Powdered gelatin, perfected by Knox Gelatin in 1894, eventually became the ideal for such packaging.

Artistic food turned up often on party menus. The fruit salad, boiled salmon with caper sauce, potatoes au gratin, chicken salad in lettuce nests, olives, wafers, pistachio
cream, and fancy cakes with green icing suggested for a Shamrock Luncheon definitely fit the qualifications of being light, dainty, and visually appealing and made delicate references to the occasion as well with the use of potatoes and the color green.68 The Valentine’s Day menu suggested by Ellye Howell Glover touched on nearly every convention of artistic cooking. Heart-shaped canapés spread with anchovy paste presented a dainty shape to tempt the palate, while tomato bouillon topped with a spoonful of whipped cream conveyed delicacy and airiness. Lamb, a lighter meat than the mutton or beef which frequently appeared on tables, appeared in the guise of crown roast, a highly elegant cut, and the peas in a heart-shaped pastry case provided a suitably delicate accompaniment. Sweet potato croquettes converted a rude root vegetable into a more refined form, and a vegetable and gelatin salad made in a heart-shaped mold and garnished with a dash of mayonnaise or a heart cut from a pickled beet fulfilled all the qualifications of a dainty salad. Heart-shaped meringues filled with strawberry ice cream provided an appropriately ethereal conclusion.69

Yet all this artistic taste frequently shaded over into what contemporaries would have called novelty. For instance, thematic cooking became popular with menus that maintained fidelity to a certain principle such as color, an ingredient, or even a shape. The more difficult the theme to maintain through a multiplicity of courses, the more awe-inspiring the feat became. Such menus have already been illustrated in the discussion of artistic cooking, but they could become far more elaborate and subtle. Guests at a “Ping-Pong Party,” for instance, might be served only foods that began with “P”: pumpernickel sandwiches, potato salad, pumpkin pie, fruit punch, and popcorn.70 Color-coordinated cooking frequently found its way onto party menus, whether red for Valentine’s Day, green for St. Patrick’s Day, or pink for a rosebud luncheon. A clever cook could combine food which naturally possessed a certain color with judiciously used dyes to produce a visually stunning feast. A red menu, for instance, could include mixed fruit with maraschino cherries, tomato bisque with warm rolls, broiled lobsters, stuffed red peppers,
finger wafers, sweetbread patties in red paper cases, red vegetable or tomato salad, cheese canapés, frozen cherries, red-frosted cakes, and red bonbons. Purple was more difficult; one suggested menu included hard-boiled eggs dyed violet served on lettuce, celery mayonnaise in violet papers, rolled sandwiches tied with violet ribbon, violet Russe, sponge cake, and violet-colored punch.⁷¹

Some manipulated refreshments around the visual imagery that accompanied a particular theme. This could be as simple as cutting sandwiches into shamrocks for St. Patrick’s Day or stacking cheese straws into Abraham Lincoln’s log cabin. However, thematic cooking could also involve considerable culinary artistry, either personal or professional. Ice cream, for instance, came in a wide variety of shapes although as “Countess Annie de Montaigue,” fashion columnist for Godey’s Magazine, commented, “It seems somewhat cannibalistic to devour Japanese maidens or the Trilby foot, which was a favorite device last winter.”⁷² A suggested “Golf Luncheon” involved a cake frosted with pistachio icing to represent a putting green, complete with a preserved cherry iced in white to resemble a ball. Bread sticks shaped like golf clubs and ices in the form of golf balls would complete the occasion.⁷³ Likewise, at a party for a sewing circle a hostess could serve oyster crackers sewn onto button cards to accompany the soup, croquettes shaped like pincushions and stuck full of darning needles, asparagus tips tied with seam tape, cheese balls molded in thimble molds, and frozen whipped cream garnished with strawberry emeries.⁷⁴ For hostesses lacking the personal skill or creativity necessary to produce such elaborations, the commercial establishment stood ready to assist. Confectioners sold ices and candy in fancy shapes and merchants provided the molds to sculpt them at home, while stationers and party-goods suppliers offered appropriate serving accessories.⁷⁵

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Sometimes food actually became entertainment. For example, some hostesses made the food into an amusement for the guests by serving an ordinary menu but describing it in terms that connected it with the theme of the occasion. Guests tried to guess what would be set before them from the menu which was presented. For instance, at a “Baseball Luncheon” each course would be depicted with baseball jargon. The meal’s “nine innings” would begin with “first strike” (oyster cocktail) and “where the losing team lands” (soup) and eventually concluded with “necessary for good playing” (preserved ginger) and “everybody scores” (favors). An April Fool’s meal might become a guessing game as the hostess presented meat hidden in an orange rind or baked potato skin, salad tucked into a banana peel, a sandwich hidden in a corn husk, or cakes concealed within the leaves of a large cabbage. Sometimes consuming the food became the entertainment; the hostess might employ the popular Victorian custom of a “fortune cake” with messages or charms baked into it that the guests discovered while eating.

Of course, the foodstuffs themselves might be novel without any special service or decoration. Theme parties based on exotic cultures called for foods from those nations subject to limitations of late-Victorian tastes, available foodstuffs and cooking abilities. At the very least a Chinese or Japanese occasion required tea, boiled rice, and cherry sherbet. Of course one could also get more elaborate. A “Dutch Card Party” might feature smoked herring, pickled eggs, rye bread, and other delicacies of Holland. Nostalgia could also render a particular foodstuff novel and allow food too utterly unfashionable for most parties to appear on a table. Jellied chicken, sliced tongue, and apple marmalade at a Washington’s birthday party evoked a pleasant historical glow where in other circumstances they would reflect only stodginess.

Not all parties required entertainment for the guests; at a luncheon, dinner, or tea the food, decorations, and conversation would provide sufficient diversion. At many gatherings, however, the hostess provided at least favors, while at others the planned
amusements became the focus of the gathering. Favors, which the hostess either offered to all of the guests or provided as prizes to the games, fell somewhere between decorations and entertainment in their function. Made or purchased by the hostess and taken home by the guests, they embodied the amusement and hospitality which had been provided for them. They preserved a tiny bit of the ephemeral atmosphere of the party; when the decorations had been taken down, the food eaten up, and the memories were beginning to fade, they remained as an aide-memoire for the guests and a record of a hostess’ achievement. Typical favors of the period are illustrated in the Washington’s Birthday section of B. Shackman & Co.’s ca.1910 trade catalogue. (Figure 4) For patriotic occasions one could purchase candy boxes representing all the favorite iconography of the George Washington history/myth, artificial cherry trees in clay pots, toy hatchets made of paper or wood, inexpensive jewelry commemorating the day, and even figurines of the young Washington himself. The catalogue also included over forty pages of general favors ranging from miniature suitcases to imitation vegetables to pencils in the shape of trumpets.80

Favors could become part of the artistic atmosphere of the party—corsages and boutonnieres of violets for guests at a “violet party” to wear, a centerpiece of silk flags that the guests could separate and take home for Lincoln’s birthday, or glass bowls filled with ferns and decorated with ribbons that adorned the table at a Fern Luncheon until guests claimed them.81 Traditional favors also included boxes of bonbons that complemented the occasion or the decorated place-cards or menu cards which the hostess placed on the table.82 However, equally as often hostesses distributed favors that emphasized the novelty of their themes. Guests at a “Football Spread,” it was suggested, could receive miniature footballs.83 A Leap Year Party at which the sexes reversed their social roles for the evening gave men’s hats made of tissue paper, candy cigarettes or cigars, and toy pistols or swords to the women, while the men received sewing kits, women’s hats, or candy boxes.84
Even getting the favors could be part of the fun. A Pie Party turned the old Jack Horner pie, a container in which the favors were hidden and then pulled out by ribbons, to good effect by making guests fish favors out of a pie filled with bran. Plans for a North Pole Dance included digging favors tucked inside cotton snowballs out of a “snowdrift” with a miniature shovel. At an Orchard Party suggested by Mary McKim Marriott, the female guests would have to poke around in a field of clover to find their favors, while the men followed tangled strings that eventually led them up trees.

Costumes, too, represented both decorations and amusement. Guests who came in artistic costumes became the decorations as they participated in the effect. Girls dressed all in white complemented a “North Pole Dance,” while rustic “country” costumes helped enhance the atmosphere of a “Peasant” or “Milkmaid” party. In her 1894 diary, May Doughty described a typical costume of the period.

I wore a short black skirt with a bright red over skirt, which was looped up on one side with a large bow of moire ribbon. On the bottom of this skirt was a border of black clubs. I had a bright red waist with ripple collar & large caps on sleeves, these were bordered with the clubs. I also wore a green & red wreath of leaves for a crown & a black mask. I made a dainty character of “Queen of Clubs.” Mamma & I made it ourselves.

Costumes could also be novel or humorous, like the “country gentleman” outfit worn by Annie Oakes Huntingdon:

I wore crash trousers, covered to the knees by a plaid apron of bright colors, a yellow necktie & a Gladstone collar, a large white hat and gloves. We had lots of fun and many people never recognized me, with my moustache and overcoat. Do not imagine that my costume was immodest. It was perfectly proper or I should not have dressed up.

Often, hostesses adapted common forms of amusement to the theme of the event. For instance, card games could be imbued with novelty or artistic taste by employing appropriately decorated cards or tally keepers used for scoring. The United States Playing Card Company advertised that it could provide “...A large number of handsome
designs...at moderate prices, allowing an almost unlimited scope for selections--Japanese designs for a Japanese party, Delft designs for a Dutch party, Owl designs for an owl party, etc."91 Tally cards sold by B. Shackman & Co. included a "Colonial series," Dutch children, Japanese lanterns, men's hats, and designs for the major holidays.92

Fortune-telling was often suggested, especially for New Year's Eve and Halloween parties. Written fortunes or symbolic charms could be hung on walls, hidden in a Jack Horner pie, baked in a cake, tied to bunches of grapes in the centerpiece, shot at with arrows, inscribed on paper fans, knotted into balls of yarn, or stuffed into nutshells.93 Fortune-telling could also utilize popping corn, candles, cabbage roots, bay leaves, kale, peas, dishes of water, apple seeds, rings, letters cut from newspapers, balls of yarn, pumpkins, saucers, feathers, roses, mashed potatoes, melted lead, or even a bowlful of flour, depending on the ingenuity of the hostess and the theme of the evening.94

Authors frequently suggested word games and mental challenges. For instance, at the "Flower Party" for which Mrs. Herbert B. Linscott offered plans, she proposed having the guests solve rhyming riddles about flowers that the hostess had hidden in flowerpots, followed by the composition of rhymes using the plants' names.95 Another author's May Day party included a "Variegated Roses" contest, with questions such as "What has been done with a newspaper? (red rose) and "A state of insanity? (wild rose)."96 May Doughty described a typical game in her diary: "We had a table covered with many things which represented names of diff. books and boys and girls had to guess them. I couldn't guess for I knew them all. Francis Woodbridge won the prize."97 Physical contests, too, might occupy the time. If one were holding a Lemon Sociable, one could arrange a timed race to string lemon seeds on a thread, a competition of rolling lemons on the floor using lead pencils or a contest where blindfolded guests tried to cut down lemons dangling from the ceiling.98 A potato race suited St. Patrick's Day.99 Games of chance might round out the evening. Although gambling would not have been acceptable, drawing hearts with
matching numbers or choosing the end of a ribbon and following it to see who was at the other end were perfectly respectable ways of assigning partners for dinner.\textsuperscript{100}

Invitations, decorations, refreshments, and amusements could all reflect a given theme in artistic or novel ways, and many common themes like holidays could be interpreted in ways that varied from the elegant to the comic. The late nineteenth-century fondness for celebrating holidays actually provided both occasion and central idea for the largest proportion of theme parties. Beginning in the 1840s and 1850s, cultural critics had urged the celebration of holidays as a way of brightening the daily round of commerce and industry; by the end of the century, these holidays had evolved into grand occasions, with their own special customs, and, of course, commercial accouterments.\textsuperscript{101} Diary entries like this one from May Doughty's 1895 journal are common during the period: "The club had a Grand Halloween party at Lou Tracy's. All of the girls dressed in witch costumes and brought their jack-o-lanterns."\textsuperscript{102} Holidays from New Year's Day and Twelfth Night to Christmas received due attention from party planners. The guests, all thoroughly familiar with the conventions being honored or tweaked, understood the symbolic communication; everyone knew why a St. Valentine's day party saw a lot of red and hearts while a Washington's Birthday fete was likely to involve either yards of bunting or neo-Colonial costumes.

Valentine's Day provides one example of how a given theme could be interpreted in multiple ways. Edith Townsend Everett wrote, "There is no occasion in the whole year when the chance for novelty in entertaining is more available than on Saint Valentine's Day. Luncheons, teas, sociables and fancy-dress functions of all sorts are easily and artistically arranged...The originality of the hostess leaves its mark on each and every plan of entertainment..."\textsuperscript{103} A Valentine luncheon planned by Mrs. Hamilton Mott would have satisfied the most aesthetically inclined Victorian lady. Beginning with pink decorations that incorporated hearts, loveknots, and horseshoes (for luck) along with quotations about
love on the place cards and on the menu, the occasion also required a heart-shaped table with lace doilies and a pink and white embroidered centerpiece. A basket of pink roses in the center of the table would enhance the atmosphere (visually and aromatically) and a pink rose at each place tied with pink ribbons and attached to a stick-pin in the shape of an enameled rose would serve as a favor. Pink fairy-lamps and pink candles with pink paper shades in the design of a rose would light the scene while pink hearts lettered in gold would tell the guests where to sit. A menu of creamed oysters in heart-shaped pink paper cases on pink plates, rice croquettes molded into hearts and accompanied by currant-jelly hearts, and ending with pink cakes and ices in appropriate shapes also left no doubt as to the occasion.

On the other hand, the “Matchmaking Dinner” proposed by Mary McKim Marriott parodied the romantic conventions. The hostess, dressed as the “Madam Grundy” who, as the embodiment of convention, regulated love affairs (as opposed to Cupid, emblematic of reckless love, who dominated most Valentine iconologies) would assign partners for the evening by having the gentlemen list the attributes they sought in wives while the ladies offered descriptions of their good points. Madam Grundy, of course, would decide who eventually paired off. The dining room, instead of the dainty pink and white of Mrs. Mott’s luncheon would display a centerpiece of a doll dressed as a severe chaperone atop a red heart doily trimmed with fringe that ended in tiny hearts. Red hearts would lie scattered across a white tablecloth, while festoons of hearts and safety matches would loop from the table to the chandelier. The women would receive boxes of matches inscribed, “There swims no goose so gray but soon or late/ She finds some honest gander for her mate,” while the men would be given miniature black iron frying pans with a message about jumping from the frying pan into the fire. Entertainment would consist of spinning the “chaperone” doll to see who she foretold as future mates, a humorous questionnaire about one’s ability to be a good spouse, and contests of darning left-handed for the women and
sewing on buttons for the men. The entire occasion gained its novelty from the subversion of conventions.\textsuperscript{105} 

Of course many parties, like the one described by May Doughty, fell somewhere in the middle.

The Y's gave a Valentine Sociable... We had a dandy time. Lizzie tended a valentine booth and one of the other girls kept a little P.O. where the boys could send their "vals" to the girls. I rec'd two pretty ones through the mail and "Henry" gave me one it was in the shape of a Heart with Forget-me-nots (illeg.) painted on it. During the eve we played lots of games. They had a (illeg.) contest and Gene and Mr. A. participated. I should die laughing to see them perform.\textsuperscript{106} 

The impression upon the guest depended whether the hostess chose to tweak or beautify the iconology associated with the occasion.

Themes could also be chosen specifically to express artistic taste or novelty. If a hostess wished to express artistic taste, she might look to a dainty and feminine aesthetic for pleasing effects. The "color tea," which used one color for food, decorations, and sometimes even dress, gained popularity in the 1880s. Eliza R. Parker mentioned in 1888, "A pretty custom has recently been introduced of colored teas... A violet tea recently given by a society lady was 'a thing of beauty and a joy forever.'"\textsuperscript{107} Even the conservative Christine Terhune Herrick, who generally disapproved of innovation in entertaining, allowed that color-coordinated occasions might be acceptable within limits. 

The so-called 'pink luncheons,' 'yellow luncheons,' etc., are easily arranged, and are usually suggested by the abundance of some flower or other, in the height of its season... The main point is to develop the color-scheme, as it is termed among artists, as thoroughly as can be done within the limits of good taste. Use as much of the chosen color in your table and dining-room decorations as you can without making things look "messy" and cheap. Avoid the use of ribbons, so far as possible, and of fussy little knick-knacks intended as souvenirs. But after all the 'pink,' 'green,' 'violet,' and 'yellow' functions are in better taste for the entertainment of very young girls or children than for guests of maturer years. 

...A form of 'Tea' much in favor a few years ago, and not yet relegated altogether to the limbo of discarded fads, is the pink, blue, or yellow Tea—or whatever the scheme of decoration may be. There is no reason why the color-scheme "Tea" should not hold its own so far as the attractiveness of decoration is concerned, for it really admits of very pretty effects when artistically conceived and executed. One must consider,
however, in planning a pink or yellow Tea, not only the table decoration and the harmony of the viands in point of color, but must not forget the predominating colors of the walls and furnishings of the dining-room. Unless one is sure of her eye for color combinations, or has a friend of artistic tastes who will advise her, it would be best not to attempt this particular form of entertainment.

The exquisite coordination of a “color” party required a female hand, and the gathering’s dainty insubstantiality reflected its femininity.

Daintiness and femininity could also be evoked by parties focusing on particularly ladylike refreshments or on fresh flowers. Suggestions included bread and honey or milk and honey teas or apple or strawberry luncheons. A peach luncheon would feature a tablecloth embroidered with peaches and foliage, a centerpiece of a peach basket painted silver and filled with pink and yellow carnations, table-favors of spun-sugar baskets filled with candied peaches, and a menu that included peach-flavored ices with pistachio ice-cream leaves, peach omelet, peach tart, jellied peaches, and iced peach soufflé. Flower-themed parties combined the artistic element of carefully coordinated elements with the elegance of fresh flowers. Flowers had been employed throughout the nineteenth century as party decorations, but they could also become the focus of the event. Suggestions for floral themes included daisies, buttercups, apple blossoms, pansies, wild asters and even pussy willows; violets and roses seemed especially popular. At a violet luncheon, for instance, a centerpiece and corsages of violets might set the tone, as would lavender candle shades and a violet dress for the hostess. A light, spring-like menu with lavender touches completed the occasion.

The flower parties represent a variation on the common theme of bringing the beauties of nature into the parlor or recreating the parlor and its functions in a natural setting. Seasonal cycles often served as themes in a world with fewer climate controls and season-blurring grocery stores than the present. If spring saw flower parties in abundance, summer, fall and winter also occasioned celebrations like the “Clover Fete,” the
"Goldenrod Party," and the "Jack Frost Card Party." At the same time, the artistic domestication of nature eliminated its dangers and rough spots. One could glory in the atmosphere of a woodland glen without fear of ants, rain, or getting lost. One example of the genre is a "Sea Luncheon," which might include invitations decorated with seaweed and marine scenes, a fire of driftwood in the parlor, jewelry of coral, seashells and pearls on the hostesses and decorations of sea-green and coral-pink to bring back guests' happy memories of vacations at the sea-shore. A "Rustic Social" complete with leaves and pinecones strewn on the parlor, lichens on the invitations, and a naturalistic pond constructed out of a washtub surrounded with potted plants would evoke a picnic atmosphere. On the other hand, an "Orchard Party" freed the guests from the confines of the domestic setting by transplanting them into purer and simpler nature with an outdoor entertainment.

The Victorian fascination with nature extended itself to American Indians, the people perceived to live in closest harmony with it. Several variations on "Indian" parties appear in the party literature. Like the nature parties, "Indian" parties civilized and domesticated their subject, eliminating inconvenient or unpleasant realities by utilizing the conventions which contemporary literature had established. At a "Hiawatha Dinner," suggested invitations read, "In the month when leaves are falling/ You are bidden to assemble/ At the lodge of Hiawatha./ To the feasting and the laughing/ Come in all your paint and feathers...Minnehaha." Naturally, the guests were to arrive in Indian costume to a house decorated with pine boughs, autumn leaves, and ripe berries, red tissue-paper shades on the lamps and a tablecloth bordered in red cotton on the table. "Navajo blanket" paper napkins and peanut Indians paddling birchbark canoes full of candy would decorate each place, as would place-cards ornamented with Indians, tomahawks, and couplets from "Hiawatha." The centerpiece, of course, would represent an Indian camp complete with
real smoke from the campfire. Indian traditions from a wide variety of regions and the fertile minds of whites interacted to create an exotic air.

The fondness for Indian lore also reflects the connection between "exotic" and "artistic" that existed for many late-Victorian women. Foreign art, costumes, and customs were strange, exciting and undoubtedly more "cultural" than those of raw young America. This predilection evolved into a wide variety of parties imitating foreign settings, especially those with charming customs. Spain, Holland, Scotland and even Denmark inspired party themes, reflecting the travels of many women in Europe and the extensive coverage of "picturesque" locales in popular periodicals. The Orient, however, proved even more compelling. The late nineteenth century witnessed a mania for things Asian, and particularly of Japanese origin. Japanese motifs turned up in silver, furniture, ceramics, and interior decoration, from objects manufactured by Tiffany for the very wealthy to inexpensive items available from "Japanese stores." Japanese parties became highly popular as well and featured Westernized versions of Japanese food, costume, and decor. Suggestions for one such affair included invitations written vertically on rice paper or placed in the arms of Japanese dolls, decorations of Japanese draperies, scrolls, umbrellas, screens, fans, lanterns and bamboo furniture, floral decorations in red, white, or yellow (the Imperial colors) or paper cherry blossoms, and having guests sit on the floor to eat rice, tea, "Japanese" salad served in little umbrellas, and cherry sherbet.

Emphasizing high culture could also reflect artistic taste. Self-culture interested thousands of Americans at the turn of the century. At one economic level, New York millionaires founded the Metropolitan Museum of Art; at another, club women listened to lectures on great authors. At the same time that Andrew Carnegie funded libraries in towns across America, women read etiquette books to find out how to host musicales featuring classical music and trained musicians. With such inspiration, one might host a musical luncheon with a centerpiece and bonbon boxes modeled after musical instruments,
quotations relating to music written on the place cards, a menu written in musical
phraseology, and a game of “Composers” (a.k.a. “Authors”) or a musicale for
entertainment. Aficionados of great literature might prefer to host a Shakespeare luncheon,
with the dishes described by quotations from the Bard, a “Dickens Dance” with the guests
costumed as the author’s famous characters and a menu of English delicacies or even a
party based on Tennyson’s “The Brook,” complete with mirror-glass brook centerpiece and
a brook trout and watercress entree.\textsuperscript{124}

History, too, earned respect. By the late nineteenth century, many Americans
desired some sort of connection with the nation’s history and, beginning with the
Centennial of 1876, nostalgia for the past became a frequent cultural theme. Whether
because of a desire to reunite a country only one generation away from civil war, fear of
being overwhelmed by strange and un-American immigrants, or a longing to regain a
simpler and more virtuous way of life, large numbers of Americans looked to the past for
inspiration or guidance. Colonial revival interiors became fashionable, antiques descended
from attics to parlors, and organizations based on genealogical connections with patriotic
figures proliferated.\textsuperscript{125}

Of course, where the culture went, there went hostesses. Historical parties
appeared in the 1870s, prompted in part by the Centennial. Winterthur Museum owns an
invitation from “The Women’s Centennial Executive Committee” for the Martha
Washington Tea Party held February 22, 1875, and Blanche Butler Ames in 1876
mentioned in a letter a relative who was preparing an “old-style dress” for a Centennial Tea.
By 1885 \textit{Godey’s Magazine} recorded historical parties as fashionable entertainment.\textsuperscript{126}
Patriotic holidays including Washington’s birthday, the Fourth of July, and Thanksgiving
provided especially appropriate occasions for historically themed parties, although a
“George and Martha” tea could be held successfully anytime. Invitations written in what the Victorians considered eighteenth-century prose set the mood.

Ye matron, Mistress Carter, sends her greetings unto you
And begs your presence at her home in Collins Avenue
Where other friends will congregate in friendship true and hearty
And join her in ye pleasures of ye old-time thimble party.
’Twill favor her if you’ll recite ye dear old-fashioned rhymes,
Or sing ye song, or tell ye tale of long forgotten times.
Perchance some bit of old-time garb upon your form will be;
But, surely, bring your sewing and prepare to stay to tea.127

Guests dressed up in clothing brought down from the attic and recut to fit larger modern figures or in new versions of “old-timey” costume. Hostesses served traditional foods like oyster pie and Banbury cakes instead of creamed chicken and charlotte russe and put away the fashionable candleshades and modern dishes in favor of brass candlesticks and Grandmother’s china. Entertainment could include anything from sewing to playing card games with decks imprinted with George Washington’s face.128 Photographer Mary Northend recorded costumed dancers performing a minuet. (Figure 5)

Hostesses might also give parties less specifically based on historical eras, drawing instead on the simpler lifestyle that many people believed the past embodied. Whether framed as a day at a country schoolhouse, a corn-husking bee, or simply an “old-fashioned party,” the occasion called for the hostess to reshape her home and guests into a facsimile of former days. Foods generally deemed too humble or out-of-fashion to be served at parties made their appearance as boiled dinner and baked beans or tomato pickles and baked custards magically evolved from stodginess into novelties. Old-fashioned dishes or styles of flower arrangements underwent similar metamorphoses; one party book suggested bringing out the castors, butter plates and teapot, no longer usually seen at the table, and placing quaint pansy nosegays at each place. Games of childhood or that parents or grandparents had played rounded out the occasion.129
Tweaking artistic conventions often emphasized the novelty of an entertainment. For instance, a slight twist on the parties given to celebrate the cycles of nature resulted in the novelty of a season out of place. Although the snowball party discussed at the beginning of this essay was designed for the Christmas season, party advice books also suggested giving “snow” parties during summer’s heat and “summer picnic” parties during the chilly months. The evocation of another, more comfortable season in the midst of summer humidity or icy temperatures must have been an agreeable fantasy.

Themes could also be novel because they were unexpected or humorous. Using a humble object, shape, or color in unconventional ways won novelty points. Elsie Sargeant Abbot saved a paper napkin and adhesive seals from a “Peanut Party” that she attended. Perhaps it resembled a “Progressive Peanut Party” described in the prescriptive literature that would involve peanuts in the decorations (strings of peanuts festooned from the chandelier), food (ranging from peanut sandwiches to peanut and grape salad), and games (a contest of dressing funniest peanut doll). Similarly, a “Picnic of Palms” would feature hand-shaped invitations, palm-leaf fans as favors, and decorations utilizing hand shapes as frequently as possible, while a “Square Meal” would employ square invitations to a meal served at a square table with square dishes, candleshades, doilies and centerpiece and featuring on the menu a feast that began with soup and toast squares and ended in cube-shaped molds of ice cream with cake squares.

Many hostesses also drew on current issues, fashions, or fads for the themes that would make their parties “something different.” By doing so, they simultaneously guaranteed a new experience for their guests and demonstrated their own sophistication and modernity. For instance, suffrage, a hotly contested political topic, formed the basis of several suggested parties. One clever idea subverted the traditional patriotic celebration of the Fourth of July into a “Declaration of Independence” party concerned with gender roles. A centerpiece of a fort manned by Cupid soldiers would set the tone for the evening, as
would the heart-shaped bonbons containing bits of "marital sarcasm for and against woman suffrage," and the menu, which included fish for masculine "fish-stories" and cold tongue ("Woman's principal instrument of warfare"). In fact, parties reversing the roles of the sexes appeared regularly in the prescriptive literature and often commemorated a leap year. Florence Crawford mentioned in her diary that "...we girls started out in carriages to go for the young men we were to take to the New [or leap] Year Party." Likewise, a social based on white ribbons, the symbol of the temperance movement, established the hostess' position on the matter with white ribbons tied around the cookies and white flowers on the table.

New technology or scientific discoveries could convey the desired flavor of modernity. In her diary Martha Vail mentioned attending a "grammaphone entertainment," and one set of authors thought up a "Radium Party" to commemorate the discovery of the new element. Silver dishes, silver ink on the place cards, silver candlesticks and silver paper around the sandwiches would evoke the metallic theme of the evening, while contests to find the letters in the word RADIUM scattered around the house and to fish "radium" (silver) jewelry out of a bowl of popcorn would occupy the guests. The debate over modern art inspired a "Cubist Social," complete with Cubist-style lampshades, checkerboard sandwiches, and guests trying to make Cubist collages of their own. Some party themes even made fun of the current theme-party mania; one author described how within her social group all the pretty color-themes had been used, and so she gave a "Color-Blind Luncheon" with flowered plates, tea service and cloth in different and garish patterns, a mix of red, pink, blue, brown and yellow flowers for the centerpiece, and food whose colors ranged from molded salmon with beets to grape gelatin with pink whipped cream. She provided smoked glasses to keep the guests from being blinded by the glare.
In short, whether giving "milkmaid luncheons" like Maud Rittenhouse or reading about "Color-Blind Luncheons" in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, middle-class women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries learned that themed parties were an up-to-date way to entertain their friends. In stores they found a wide variety of goods from which to construct these occasions, and in prescriptive literature they discovered instructions for arranging the entertainments. Accounts of a few of these parties survive in diaries or personal correspondence, although most of the memories have proved as transient as the paper goods and edibles manufactured for the festivities. The prescriptive literature fills some of the gaps, subject to the limitation that authors described ideals rather than reality. Still, one can reconstruct the cultural values of artistry and novelty that shaped themed parties.

This was to some extent, and it is impossible to determine how great, a mental material culture. That is to say, it was a way of using and communicating with objects that was at least partly imagined rather than enacted. Some women held theme parties, while others read about them or considered the possibility of hosting them. The important issue is that the themed party was a language of objects that most middle-class women were exposed to and, because of their cultural context, understood. This essay has explored the types of objects employed in the themed party, the messages of artistic taste and novelty which it was constructed to convey and the subtle ways in which these messages were intertwined. The question remains, however, as to why this language appealed so widely that descriptions of parties appeared in nearly every mass-circulation women's magazine of the period.

Authors writing for middle-class women faced a complex audience at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, for the world was changing around their readers. This female audience had generally been educated better than its mothers,
and its daughters were likely to receive a better education yet. Moreover, opportunities to use that training were increasing. Although employment after marriage still met with disapproval for the most part, young women who supported themselves until matrimony had grown much more common. Some even pursued lifelong careers as part of the new professionally trained elite. Married women found more outlets outside the home too, as organizations for self-culture, for historical nostalgia, or even for suitably feminine reform grew. Political issues of interest to women, especially temperance and suffrage, had been discussed since mid-century. Now, however, the debates became more heated and drew more attention from the general public. Mass production and increasingly intense pursuit of consumers by manufacturers and merchants, growing access to electricity and other modern technologies, easier transportation and a greater variety of destinations—all represented facets of a new and strange way of living.

How to respond to these changing circumstances? No one quite knew. The print media offered volumes of solutions, both with direct prescriptions about how to dress, cook, raise one’s children, treat one’s husband, and decorate the house and with suitably illustrative reporting and fiction. Yet even these displayed self-contradiction. And certainly readers have never felt required to obey expert advice in its entirety. In fact, many of the articles in the Journal, for instance, meant to respond to women who claimed that the prescriptions offered were too difficult, too complicated, or just not practical for their lives.

Probably most women encountered change in little steps—a neighbor bought a new car, a friend acquired a phonograph, the grocery store started stocking canned goods, a daughter wanted to go to college. So perhaps we should look to the little things for responses to the changes as well. The authors of the party literature examined in this essay consistently used novelty and artistic taste, embodied in the material culture which they described, to appeal to their readers. Artistic taste, although shaped by the aesthetic
movements of the late nineteenth century, referred in many of its qualities to expectations of
and by women that dated back well into the nineteenth century. Women who liked dainty
and feminine and attractive things, who utilized those values in their entertaining, expressed
preferences that had been acceptable and even praiseworthy for generations. Novelty, on
the other hand, was a product of the new age. To like new things, to appreciate surprises
and the previously unknown, reflected the far-reaching change and the expectation of more
to come that marked the end of the century. Women who included novel elements in their
entertaining were modern women, fully cognizant of the present state of the world. Where
many cultural developments represented the struggle between the extremes, the theme party
combined the two. Indeed, the theme party itself integrated both ideals—the long-held
belief that women should entertain and the basic forms, along with new ideas about the
method of doing so.

In short, then, themed parties were a mediating device. They represented a small
and safe step into modernity without abandoning the past; the women who gave them were
up-to-date without being outrageously so. They offered compromise by using a language
that women spoke comfortably—domesticity and the small, material things like tablecloths
and sandwiches—while communicating a slightly radical message that women ought to
accept change with grace and even take pleasure in it. They also reassured that change
could take place without the loss of womanliness or tradition, that novelty could be safely
utilized without fear of being consumed by it. That this material language remained at least
partially envisioned rather than enacted does not negate its validity. The important issue is
that women communicated with each other using a language encrypted in objects. A
women could participate in the exchange by reading about theme parties and the material
culture they embodied as well as by creating a theme party in her own home. Indeed, the
decision that she made about whether to give this mental material culture concrete form
probably partially reflected the messages that it would convey about her.
Maybe no one ever gave a "Parlor Snow Frolic" as Mary Dawson and Emma Telford described it. The importance is the creation of one kind of material culture, both envisioned and enacted, that eased the transition between tradition and modernity before the First World War. Granted, that culture was made up of humble and insubstantial things. But in a way, it could be more effective because it was non-threatening. I do not argue that all middle-class women thought in this language, or that it was the only transitional culture imagined or embodied. Each woman visualized and created material expressions that reflected her cultural experience or ideals. But I do argue that the theme party is evidence of one set of tools available to that woman in dealing with a difficult transition, and one which thousands of women encountered and utilized to varying degrees. Crepe paper and creamed chicken do provide a lens with which to focus on the cultural matrix and the strains which pulled upon it, and heart-shaped cookies and pink geraniums signified more than food and potted plants.
ENDNOTES


3 Interestingly, writers of the period never used the term “theme party.” Although ahistorical, however, the term seems to be the easiest way to categorize a distinctive genre of entertainment and will be used in this essay in that sense. I will also use the term “Victorian” to describe the people who held and attended such parties. I apply that term in the sense that Daniel Walker Howe (“Victorian Culture in America,” in *Victorian America*, ed. Daniel Walker Howe (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976), 3-28) defines it; Victorians were a particular subculture of American society in the nineteenth century based in the middle and upper class and holding a particular set of values based on promotion of moral character, time-consciousness, rational order, etc.


For the sake of simplicity, this paper will focus mainly on the theme party as given by individual hostesses; however, the reader ought to keep in mind the extensive popularity of themed entertainment beyond private households. One example is the description given in the high school diary of May, Doc. 872 (The Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera) on 7 January 1894, when she wrote, "Mr. Brainard let all the Senior Class, and some others, out at 9:30, as the Chizzle Wizzle Fair was to begin that night and we had to decorate the hall and booths. Addie J. Charlotte (Polly) and I had the Candy Booth, and we draped it ourselves in orange and white."


Grier, *Culture and Comfort*, 136-140.


Orvell, 55.


33 Victorians generally associated "artistic" and "beautiful," especially at the popular level. The twentieth-century perspective that art and beauty need not necessarily be associated had not yet become a generally accepted cultural premise.


37 Ellye Howell Glover, "*Dame Curtsey's* Book of Party Pastimes for the Up-to-Date Hostess" (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1912), i.


39 Dawson and Telford, 16-18.


52 Dennison Manufacturing Co. (Boston, etc.), Dennison's crepe paper napkins: season 1904. ([Boston?): Dennison, [1904?]), No. 82. Playing cards / No. 84. Ping Pong.

53 Linscott, 149-150.

54 Abbot, unnumbered page.

55 Dawson and Telford, 28-33.

56 Glover, 35-36.

57 Linscott, 102-103.

58 Mott, 115-117. Entertaining with Cards, 28.


62 Mott, 115-117.


64 Linscott, 19-22.

65 Mary E. Blain, Games for All Occasions (New York: Barse & Hopkins, 1909), 164-166.

66 Shapiro, 83-84.

67 Ibid., 96-103.

68 Linscott, 166-68.

69 Glover, 24.
70 Linscott, 149-150.

71 Entertaining with Cards, 17-19.


73 Linscott, 82-83.


76 Blain, 144-146.

77 Glover, 3.


83 Glover, 152-153.


85 Linscott, 147.

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97 Doughty, 28 February 1894.


99 Linscott, 177-178.

100 Glover, 25-27, 51-52.


102 Doughty, 15 November 1895.


106 Doughty, 18 February 1894.


112 Glover, 34-35.


115 Dawson & Telford, 234-5.


122 Linscott, 102-103.


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Figure 1. Page from stationery salesman's sample book. (Carter, Rice and Co., Boston, MA [1880-1899?]. Col. 11 (83 x 103.2a). Courtesy the Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera.)
Figure 2. Examples of novelty paper napkins. (Dennison Manufacturing Co. (Boston, etc.)  
*Dennison's crepe paper napkins: season 1904.* [Boston?]: Dennison, [1904?] No. 82. 
Playing cards / No. 84. Ping Pong. Courtesy, The Winterthur Library: Printed Book and 
Periodical Collection.)
Figure 3. Detail of flower and caption from page of Elsie Sargeant Abbot scrapbook. (Elsie Sargeant Abbot, Germantown, PA. (1893-1899). Doc. 156 (90x60). Courtesy The Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera.)
Figure 5. A colonial revival entertainment. (Mary H. Northend Collection, #5964 “Christmas Party.” Courtesy, The Winterthur Library: Decorative Arts Photographic Collection.)