

Principles of Interior Decoration

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# Principles of Interior Decoration -

You have done me the honour of asking me to speak to you on "The principles of Interior Decoration" and, in this I have to acknowledge that your energetic secretary has caught me napping. I have, in fact, been avoiding this subject for some years past and that for the reason that it is not merely a very difficult subject on which to speak but that I doubt if it is a subject at all. Interior decoration is a part of the design of a building, like exterior decoration, building construction, engineering and all the other arts and sciences which go to make up the great art of architecture and its principles cannot be separated. Yet I can hardly give you a general lecture on the principles of Aesthetic. That would bore me very much and you even more, for the principles of Aesthetic are an most excessively high philosophy. It is of them that one expert once told me "It does not really matter what philosophy of aesthetic you believe, provided that you do believe one."

To apply the argument to a quite commonplace case it is as though you were to ask me for a few remarks on the principles of pie making and I were to retort with a learned lecture on the chemistry of cooking.

There are in fact no principles of Interior decoration apart from the general principles of the art of Architecture.

~~The first decoration of a room is its shape and its construction.~~

But there is one great principle of Architecture which I think is apt to be forgotten in the endless talk about styles and so on. Architecture is the art which uses construction as a means of expression. Just as painting is the art which uses paint for in which the artist uses paint to express his idea, as sculpture is the art in which he uses marble or bronze, so Architecture is the art, as I say, in which the artist uses constructive materials, and the needs of life, to express the ideal of his building. He makes his building lofty, or low, narrow or broad, simple

Construction



or ornate as a means of expressing the highest purpose of the building, he makes it of plaster, ~~of~~ of wood of brick or stone and uses these materials to produce an effect, as we say, that is to carry an idea to the eye of the observer. This is the art of architecture.

So in the interior of a building the first element of the decoration is the shape, and the construction of the individual hall, staircase or room. If this is carefully and beautifully laid out the room is already beautiful, if it is not the room will never reach any height of expression however much we may paint it and hang it with tapestries.

So, you see, if we were to consider the real principles of beauty in the interior of buildings we would have to begin by studying the principles of planning, the beautiful arrangement of parts, the proportioning of windows and so on. I hardly think that this is what you want, for indeed, you would very justly say, most of us have to live in readymade houses where we have no say in the planning. We have to take what is given us and to make the best of it.

This is true and, so long as our very imperfect civilization compels us to live in readymade houses so long as houses are built to sell, rather than to live in, so long will we have this difficulty.

But it was not always so. Our forefathers in that medieval age <sup>from</sup> which we <sup>have advanced</sup> deplore so much, had no such difficulty. The old farmhouses which we so often see in France or in England, the wayside inns of the old roads, with their quiet comfortable interiors, were built to live in. They have never been deliberately decorated. They were built in comely manner of straightforward material and their rooms were beautiful even before they were lived in. Then to them has been added that beauty of which comes of long habitation by human beings, long use by human hands till age and careful usage have given a quality which comes not from any



application of cold principles - you cannot copy these things. (People try -

a later and more sophisticated generation in the XVIII century did apply deliberate schemes of architecture to the interior of the building but and of course in all public buildings the decoration of the interior has to be very carefully considered but the point I wish to make is that the principles upon which this decoration is designed are the great principles of architecture and, in any good building; it is not possible to separate the interior architecture from the plan, the construction or the exterior.

In our houses however, and to some degree in many public buildings, a certain small part of the architecture is usually left, to be finished by the occupier. He can choose the colour of his walls, the character of his furniture and so on. The most I can do is to give you such advice as I am capable of on this last stage in the finishing of a building. I remember a little book which was brought out some time in the seventies, shortly after the beginning of the "Arts and Crafts" movement. It was called "Hints on Household Taste" The Hints of 1870 were not exactly what we would approve of, for taste varies from generation to generation. Indeed the illustrations were singularly ugly but the title was right. All we can really do on this subject is to give hints, tho no doubt we will base them upon larger principles.

Expression

Now, in the first place, every interior has an expression, even the most commonplace little bedroom in an apartment house has an expression of some kind. It is for instance either dignified or not, either interesting or not. It has very simple shapes, or, if it is an attic, it is very much cut up into corners. Whatever its expression may be, it is never wise in decoration to try and work against that expression. The best result is always



Blamed by allowing the natural expression of the room to dictate the decoration.

To take an extreme example, if you have a large lofty room to treat, it must be treated to preserve the dignified qualities of such a room. However much you may like the qualities of the broad low rooms of the old inn, it is quite vain to attempt to get them in a room whose shape is in opposition to such a scheme. This sounds very simple, yet I have in mind the main diningroom of a large hotel - not in this city - which is a very large + lofty room. It has been decorated in the manner of the French palaces of the XV century where the rooms were mostly quite low. The effect is to my eye far from right. The natural dignity of the room is fighting with the natural warmth of the decoration.

Periods

If you look at the catalogues of furniture makers and decorators you will find there many references to "Period furniture" "Styles of decoration" "Louis quince" and so on. Now all this talk is simply utter nonsense, in so far as it is not artistic wickedness. It would be a blessing for architecture, decoration and all the arts if we could for twenty years forget that Periods or styles existed and content ourselves with good work instead. The fact that your ceiling happens to have a general resemblance to one which Le Brun might have designed in the XVII century is not the slightest reason why you should be confined to the furniture fashionable at that date. Any more than to the clothes or to the speech and manners of the period. So, in all matters of decoration my advice to you is as strong as I can make it. Never pay any attention to styles or periods. Pay attention to simple direct design. Period furniture may be good furniture but it is none the better for being period. As for those monstruities



The Louis XV drawingroom, The Queen Anne boudoir and the Jacobean Diningroom. Words fail me to express my views upon them. The philosopher might find it interesting to discover why our very wealthy citizens dine better in a Jacobean Diningroom. Or why their drawingrooms are always Louis quinze. I only know that both are quite wrong. We are XX century Canadians and our houses should be XX century Canadian too.

Economy.

There is another and a very important principle of art which we must not forget and that is the principle of economy. I do not mean entirely economy of cash, though that may result, but economy of effort.

In a picture we all know that the master executes in one brush stroke that which the tyro can hardly attain in many. This economy of effort is one of the great charms of fine painting. We feel that the artist has at once and directly penetrated to the very heart of his subject, and has set down exactly what he wished, without fumbling. Of course this artistic economy is often the result of long and careful consideration.

In decoration it is as important as in any other branch of art. Always stop decorating as soon as possible. It is better to be too bare than too full, it is better to be empty than to be crowded. I suppose that 90% of the rooms & houses that one sees are overfurnished and overdecorated.

Of course it is very difficult to tear oneself away from some commonplace object endeared to us by association. It is often impossible. But it is always possible to look it straight in the face, say - you are ugly but I want you - and put it where it will do least harm. I really think that most rooms could have a good deal cleared out of them if we would only go through each object in turn - with a lumber



box handy for the discards. Some drawingrooms are more like second hand museums than rooms meant to live in.

So in choosing colours or papers one must always keep in mind that they have to serve as a background to this mass of furniture, pictures and odds and ends which we so industriously accumulate round us. If you are going to put a lot of things into a room it is waste of effort to cover the walls with a loud patterned paper. The simplest decoration which is suitable is always the best.

You may notice I said the simplest which is suitable. ~~Some~~ great public halls may demand an elaborate enrichment. The reception room of a King must look royal, but even here the simplest scheme which gives the required impression will be the best. Economy is always a sign of great art.

Now perhaps we had better get down to something practical. First then we may take the treatment of walls. The most beautiful wall decoration of course is to paint the entire wall with suitable subjects. Of this the Italian Frescos are the greatest old examples and in modern times some very splendid mural decoration has been done. The work of Puvis de Chavannes is particularly noticeable. This is the most splendid form of decoration but is suitable only for fairly large spaces because, to be properly seen the whole of the decoration must be raised six feet from the floor, so that it will not be interrupted by furniture or by people passing. It therefore requires some kind of a dado or panelled treatment below it and can hardly be used in any room less than fifteen or twenty feet high.

All good mural decoration has one ~~great~~ common quality. It does not make a hole in the wall. This is very evident in the Pantheon in Paris where ~~great~~ large wall panels have been executed by many



painters, including Puvis de Chavanne. Most of them, following the tradition of the panel picture, painted their scenes in full light and shade, as though the picture were a scene viewed through a hole in the wall. Chavanne painted his with only the most delicate suggestion of light and shade his picture is on the wall and does not break the building. Most of our painters today are incapable of wall decoration because they are incapable of seeing the wall. It has however struck me that some of the artists of the so-called Toronto School whose vision is so evidently cramped by the limits of the panel picture would be able to cope with ~~the~~ large wall spaces. Of course this rule is a part of the general principle of economy. We begin our decoration scheme with a flat wall, and the best decoration is one which uses the flatness of the wall as a part of the scheme, not wasting or neglecting this quality. In ~~all~~ decoration it is always better that a thing should look like what it is + should not try to look like something else. Even a radiator is on the whole better looking as a radiator than if you try to pretend that it is a table. You can of course put a radiator casing over it + that will look best if it really looks like a radiator casing with plenty of grilles in it.

We cannot all have full mural painting, we have to be content with little bits of pictures which we can hang upon our walls. So, the first thing to consider in decorating a wall is exactly what you have to put on it. Select the principal object which you have which must go in that room. Put it in the best place for it and then consider the rest of the scheme. It is always well to go from step to step. We will suppose for instance that you have two large dark family portraits which must go into the diningroom.



Now in the first place a glazed picture must not be hung opposite a window. The reflections will prevent its being seen. Pictures usually cannot be hung on the window side, so the possible places for your two pictures will be quite limited. Consider them as in position and then build the rest of the room round them. This is I believe the only safe way of decorating begin with what you must have, pass on to what you may have and stop there.

Your dark coloured pictures will require a little care in the wall colour. If the frames are very bright gold they can easily be dulled with a little oil paint - burnt umber, and a soft brush. Now a dark picture against a light wall will look darker if you want your picture to look ~~light~~ luminous you must make the background, that is the wall - darker than the picture. So the old Dutch flower & fruit pieces, which are very dark, look splendid framed into dark oak panelling. It is however quite possible to set dark pictures against a lighter background they look rich in colour rather than luminous.

The rule for this is very simple. White makes anything colour against it look pure and dark black makes it look impure and light. So watercolours, which are naturally pure but lack weight look best in a <sup>light</sup> white mount. ~~it increases their~~ ~~darkness~~ Oil paintings which are naturally heavy and impure look best in a darker mount (like pure colour - colour without white)  
 ~ Impure colour

Magnificent effects can be produced by setting clear bright colours against black, just as we often set very pure fragile colour against white.

~~Black has actually been used in decoration for this effect.~~

A black diningroom has actually been used to take advantage of this. The room was used only by artificial light. Walls, ceiling & floor were all dead



black with a soft mouse less carpet. The table was lighted by small candles set on it + there was no other light in the room. The table was covered with a brilliant white cloth set with glass, silver + brightly coloured flowers. The effect I am told was startlingly brilliant as the black background forced up every bit of colour on the table. The diners also had the sensation of being alone in the midst of endless space, since nothing was visible anywhere excepting the table and the guests.

This is an extreme case but black is not often enough used where great brilliancy is required. This is of course why pale complexioned men look best in evening clothes - the black gives them brilliancy. Red complexioned people should, as no doubt you know, avoid black.

Where the colours of the people + the furniture are all delicate white makes an admirable wall. White ball rooms have been very successful, but for ordinary use white strengthens too much whatever stands against it. So we have to modify our white. This we can do either along the warm lines, or along the cold ones.

Theoretically of course we could take any colour and treat our wall with any shade, from the merest tinge of colour to the purest + most saturated shade or ~~to~~ gradually degrade to black.

Practically there are limitations.

Firstly a good purple cannot be obtained in commercial paint, any purple we may use must ~~practic~~ be confined to drapery or small objects.

Similarly a good crimson or a pure yellow are very difficult to get. Pure blue is unobtainable - Prussian.

Practically we find ourselves with four possibilities

- 1 we may begin with parchment colour + advance through yellow to brown.
- 2 begin with pink and progress to the brick reds.
- 3 ~~begin~~ take the series of greens
- 4 Take the series of blues.



The blues are the cold colours. The reds the warmest. The browns and greens the most restful.

Pure colours are difficult to use successfully. They really require the stage to themselves, so to speak. Excepting in small patches they are too assertive to be used. So practically we always either render our colours ~~either~~ impure by mixing white into them - or degrade them by mixing black. The well known "art colours" soft shades which go well with everything, are all degraded. and are generally very impure as well. In fact the secret of getting apparently impossible colours to go together is simply to dilute them sufficiently with black and white.

Blue and red for instance, if pure, clash. but degrade the red to russet, give it a little white to make it rose, degrade the blue a little in the same way and the combination of old rose with a dull quiet blue may be perfectly suitable.

Very many delightful colour schemes can be worked out with the pale tints. The school of Adams and the Empire decorators of France used these very slight tints with great success, but, of course they require that the furnishings, carpets and pictures be as delicate as themselves.

So we generally take refuge in the browns where we want warmth, the blues where we want space and coolness and the greens where we want an intermediate quality.

The browns and yellows are the best where the room must have much red in it. We have said that pale people look well in black, so people of ruddy colour usually look well in old gold + brown.

The exception is the brilliant black, red and ~~white~~ <sup>cream</sup> of some southern people whose brilliancy is increased by black. If they want to look quiet they must however wear browns.

So persons of florid complexion may be well advised to live in brown + yellow rooms.



A quiet brown, the colour of partridge, or putty, makes an admirable background for most pictures. Oatmeal colour is about the best shade.

The common wrapping paper used by grocers is a very excellent colour too. It is very cheap, easily got but difficult to hang. Most paperhangers regard me as quite mad if you propose to use it, and will find enormous difficulty in getting it. I had a house in the country done with it and it was most successful.

For a very sunny room in summer the browns are a little too warm and the greens or blues are better.

Some day I am going to do a summer cottage in a warmish grey blue with all the woodwork in canary yellow. The yellow is just to keep the blue from being too cold.

So far I am considering only plain colours and I believe that for our small rooms, usually well crowded with things plain colours are the best. A small pattern, in a second shade of the same colour gives richness to the colour, but more than one absolute colour on a wall is very dangerous indeed.

In a small house great unity may be obtained by using the same colours for the walls and woodwork throughout the house. I recently did a little country house in brown walls with white paint throughout, livingroom bedrooms kitchen and all. It made the house look very much larger, and was distinctly cheaper. I believe that for most ordinary apartment houses this is the best plan one plain colour for the walls, one for the woodwork and use the same throughout the house.

In a large house of course change is necessary, but only in a very large house.

As to the exact colours why that is very much a matter of temperament. Colours affect people very



differently and it is quite impossible to lay down any rules. These curious tables which profess to say what colours go with what are perfectly useless.

Our walls are frequently divided with a low, or high dado + a cornice, above which is the ceiling. The quiet browns of panelling are always interesting but I should like to enter a protest against two ideas. one, that ~~that~~ the natural grain of wood is always beautiful and two that green stain is ever beautiful. The fine grained woods often have a beautiful grain, oak, walnut + mahogany, and can be left with a dull polish. White pine will weather to a beautiful brown if let alone - only we are never patient enough to let it alone but pitch pine for instance is simply ugly - so is bass wood - and the quicker they are painted the better. ~~I would as~~ Everything in nature is not necessarily beautiful and a raw slice of pine is about as good a decoration as a raw slice of ham. This passion for stained and varnished pine is best seen in some of our churches but I have known it to invade houses too. As for that green stain, I find myself unable to talk coherently about it.

The parts of a wall are best treated in shades of the same colour, if you have an oak dado, do not, as I have seen done, put a blue frieze above it - try a cream coloured one.

The cornice can either be regarded as the top of the wall and made the same colour as the wall or be regarded as the frame of the ceiling and made to match the ceiling. The first is the French method + increases the height the second is the English, and increases the width of the room.

Elaborate decoration should never be put on to a ceiling unless in a very large room. In a large room, a hall public hall or a church the ceiling is really the best place to decorate. The great advantage to the architect of decorating the



ceiling is that it is the one place that his client can ~~spare~~ not get at.

I remember a house in the decoration of which a good deal of trouble had been taken. The owner put a large tablecloth in the middle of the best room.

It was a deep rich crimson and had a large purple fringe. The effect was devastating. He can't do that to the ceiling.

Simple moulded decoration in white can be put on any ceiling, & these modelled plaster ceilings are amongst the most delightful decorations of architecture. They are best kept white.

The ceiling of a large hall is really the best place for full decoration. Here we can paint badges, coats of arms wreaths and symbols of all kinds in good clear flat colour & be satisfied that time will improve all we do.

In such a hall, where the colour is all in small patches, on a light background, and all at some distance from the eye the brighter it is the better. The bigger the patch the quieter the colour is quite a good rule. The decoration of our public halls is too often handed over to some commercial firm who have no ideas beyond three coats of paint finished flat - with a line. If any of you should be in Kingston go & look at the Sir Arthur Currie memorial hall at the R.M.C. I think it is the most complete piece of heraldic decoration in Canada.

the blue ceiling  
for low rooms

& yellow floor

(French Canada)

Now let us get to the hangings. I know that the proper thing is first to put a blind to each window, then put lace curtains, then put heavy rep curtains, then put a couple of pds of aspidistra and then complain that the architect does not give enough light. Of course he should realise that a window is really a cross between a drapery store and a greenhouse, but he goes on popping.



Now we have to put up something to shut out the light when we want to darken the room. Personally I use either curtains or a blind, never both.

The less stuff one has in a room the better. As the object of the curtains is to shut out light, a dark colour suggests itself. This is why lace curtains are to me so objectionable. If the window is overlooked plain curtains, ~~straw~~ hung on the window itself may be necessary, or if the view out of the window is disagreeable. So in that case you set two sets of curtains, one to secure the window, one to shut out the light when necessary - but no blinds.

The old housewives, as I remember, regarded such things as desirable in themselves. I remember one old lady who spent much of her life in pulling blinds down to keep the carpet from being faded pulling them up again to let light into the room putting on dust sheets, taking them off. Dusty corner tables so shaky that no houseman as to appear afflicted with palsy and so covered with fragile ornaments that a housemaid could not be trusted near them. The old housewife gave herself a great deal of quite unnecessary labour and then, after all, usually did not use the room. This, by the way, is the person whom we are ~~called~~ to regard as a model.

So I believe in having as few curtains as possible. + having those good substantial ones. I have myself a great liking for the Canadian homespun curtains + indeed these Canadian curtains, + rugs are in many ways better than the imported things. It is a pity they are not more used.

I have already said a little about so-called "period furniture". The choosing of furniture is to a very large degree a matter of taste + every one must follow their own. But I may make



one or two suggestions

1. Do not trouble too much about uniformity  
Suites - in big rooms

2. Under furnish

3. attend to scale. 1 a lofty room, rather  
low furniture

A low broad room will often stand better  
furniture - enhance the character etc.

The small person, with small furniture in  
a big room

A general harmony between the room & furniture  
but comfortable furniture is always nice to look  
at.

Mr Jiggs & the "Morris Chair" once  
regarded as a fad.

I hope I have not laid down the law  
too much. Always what learned people  
call the "personal factors". Colour affects  
people in different ways, so that it is not  
possible - or desirable to have too many rules  
the best I know are.

1 be simple

2 be quite direct

+ 3 however little you have - have it good.