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Vistas on the Past: Tapestries and the Period Style Interior (c. 1900–1940)

ABSTRACT

One of the more noticeable cultural consequences of modernisation seems to be a fascination with origins and identity, and the reconfiguration of history to suit these demands. In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, this rediscovery and remaking of the past had many dimensions. The long neglected ‘period’ style interior, so popular in early-twentieth-century Britain and America, originated in a desire to return to find cultural certainty in a world of technical and social turmoil. Incorporating antique furniture or reproductions set within a more or less defined historical ‘period’, this way of designing the interior was seen as authenticated by its origins in an idealised English (or American) past.

This nostalgic preference for the ‘period’ style appeared in magazines devoted to collecting and furnishing, illustrated histories of furniture, textiles, rugs and decorative arts, and the expensive ‘period rooms’ erected in many museums. The passion of the very wealthy and their architects to collect and incorporate sometimes very grand antique elements into their homes was much admired by middle class homemakers. Interior designers and architects, department stores and furniture and furnishing manufacturers all profited from this trend. Its historical veracity, cultural depth and balanced aesthetic were contrasted approvingly with the experiments and passing fashions of design-led innovation.

Using the archives of AH Lee and Sons, a leading English manufacturer of luxury furnishing textiles, this paper will examine the aesthetic at work in the period style interior, and particularly the role of the tapestry, one of its key visual and sensual elements. This provided a handcrafted vista onto an idealised past, mirroring the values enshrined in the interior in which it was placed.

The lure of the antique

It was the Arts and Crafts movement that first convinced English-speaking middle class homemakers of the beauty, integrity and moral virtue of both vernacular architecture and the simple handcrafted objects and furniture of the pre-industrial English village.¹ Following this nostalgic vision, the world of the medieval craftsman was remade into a more honest, useful and beautiful alternative to the desolation wrought by industrialisation.² In her memoir, *Period Piece*, Gwen Raverat, a well-known artist and niece of Charles Darwin, conveys something of this simultaneously romantic and socially active Arts and Crafts mentality in a description of one of her Darwin uncles and his house:

The author would like to thank Ellen Kravet for permission to make use of the Lee Jofa archive in her possession in New York and the GP and J Baker archive in Oxfordshire, and Dr Philip Sykas, keeper of this archive, for his kind assistance. I would also like to thank the Trustees at the Williamson Art Gallery and Museum in Birkenhead for permission to cite and make use of the A.H. Lee archive held there.

1. Harris, 1993, p.32ff; MacCarthy, 1994, p.259 ff; Miele, 2005.

2. Willis, 2006.

Uncle Richard had adored Ruskin, and worshipped Morris, and had slept for years with a copy of *In Memoriam* under his pillow ... In fact, Uncle Richard had done everything that an enlightened person, flourishing in the middle of the nineteenth century, ought to do: taught at the Working Men's College, organised great country walks, admired Nature, and all the rest of it ... The old house at Kensington Square had a very strong flavour of its own. It was a peculiar kind of earthly paradise — earthly, not celestial. It was a tapestry, worked in rich, bright colours to a complex pattern, a Morris tapestry, not a medieval one. The food was delicious, the beds were soft, the rhythm ran smoothly, everyone was kind and good and true and happy; and it seemed as if evil could never come near.³

In many respects, the Arts and Crafts movement on both sides of the Atlantic can be seen as a new development in a more deeply rooted romantic 'pastoral' tradition cast in creative opposition to the dominant utilitarianism of the industrial nineteenth century, a tradition we can trace back to Blake, Cobbett and Pugin.⁴ But Morris's idealisation of the pre-industrial past interacted with, and reacted against, a very different but common Victorian fascination with history as a 'master discipline'.⁵ The many advances and popularity of historical study, libraries, museums and collections, coupled with the packaging of the past into selected exemplars or canons of great works in literature, art or architecture, was closely linked to the triumph of middle-class values and sensibilities, of a society engaged in reforming and civilising the known world in its own image.⁶ And this known world was continually expanding, with Englishmen and women taking their visions of 'old England' and its civilising culture to the far-flung corners of the empire, from Delhi to Cape Town, Singapore to Ontario.⁷

After Ruskin, Morris's critique of Victorian imperial historicism had rested on its hypocrisy and moral bankruptcy, made manifest in the factory system, its slave-like conditions and the 'shoddy' results of its mass-production. For Morris, exemplary medieval or early modern handcrafted, often anonymous vernacular works, in architecture, furniture, tapestries, glass-making, metal-work, and illustrated manuscripts and books, were taken to contain their own moral, material and social lessons, which pointed to the possibility of a more rewarding, happy and aesthetically satisfying life.⁸ This led to a revival of interest in the history and surviving practices of vernacular building, furniture making, decorative arts and textile weaving as keys to a richer, more fulfilling material life — especially for the home, the site of much of Morris's commercial and aesthetic reforming efforts.⁹ Spurred on by this novel presentation of an 'authentic' past embodied in the hand-made, and by exemplary items to be found in many private collections and museums, an increasing number of books, journals and articles were published on the history of the decorative arts and furniture in Britain and America in the first decades of the twentieth century, and there was a related expansion in the market for antiques and reproduction furniture,

3. Raverat, 1952, pp. 126–130.

4. Hart, 2010; Evans, 1988; Buckley, 2007.

5. Lowenthal, 1985, p. 96 ff; Cohen, 2006.

6. Lokko, 2002; Colls, 2002; Matless 1998.

7. Jones, 2007.

8. Miele, 2005; and Crawford, 1997.

9. Cohen, 2006, pp. 145–169.

decorative arts and textiles in London and New York.¹⁰ What had once been an expensive elite trade in antiques and architectural salvages became during the 1920s a middle class passion, with the world of cheaper reproduction furniture and textiles making the historicising fantasies of the wealthy more widely available, and more amenable to this romantic national historical dream.¹¹ All over the English-speaking world, various ‘old’ English-style cottages and houses sprang up, a testament to the endurance and extent of this romantic nationalist vision of the past and its expression in the idea and appearance of ‘home’.

This growing fascination with an idealised national past of picturesque village and field, garden and cottage, had found a close parallel in the ‘colonial revival’ in America.¹² On both sides of the Atlantic, a large number of books and articles were published in the first decades of the twentieth century presenting and often idealising the lost world of the pre-industrial English or American village, the county or district, its history, crafts, customs and picturesque qualities, and these were also eagerly read in the colonies, and wherever the English middle class ventured.¹³ This was followed by an increase in the construction and display of ‘authentic’ house museums in England and America, and many larger museums undertook the construction of ‘period rooms’, which were developed to cater for this fascination with what was now seen as a part of a valuable national or European cultural ‘heritage’.¹⁴ It is not surprising that, given these circumstances, books and journals on domestic architecture and home decoration providing design advice echoed this taste for the ‘authentic’ antique and picturesque vernacular as expressing the true national character, a romantic and nostalgic predilection that was greatly intensified by the terrible losses of the First World War.¹⁵ This ‘war to end all wars’, ostensibly fought in the name of ‘civilisation’, was often imagined by many middle-class Englishmen in a romantic, chivalric and pastoral light, a world now threatened not only by industrialisation and commercialisation, but also by the new and terrible machinery of war.¹⁶

This widespread middle-class attachment to the antique was at bottom thoroughly personal and domestic in its origins and manifestation. As Susan Matt has argued in a wide-ranging essay, for nineteenth-century Americans, what made a house a home was an appearance of age in its design and contents, since this suggested continuity and identity, and familial stability and rootedness, which were otherwise likely to be swept away by the realities of contemporary middle-class life, with its increasing mobility amidst accelerating social and technological change.¹⁷ This ‘suggestion’ of the past had to be created thoughtfully to an authentic plan through design, with a large selection of books, journals and architectural plans available to advise homemakers how this considered effect might be achieved, even for those on more modest budgets.¹⁸ Through assembling and exploiting a vocabulary of past forms,

10. For example, Litchfield, 1903; Jacquemart, 1907; Macquoid, 1904–8; Foley, 1911–2; Odom, 1918–9; Roe, 1920; Macquoid and Edwards, 1924–7.

11. Harris, 2007; Jeremiah, 2000.

12. Wilson, 2006.

13. Bourne, 1912; Ball, 1913; Lock, 1925; Matless, 1998.

14. Harris, 2007; Keeble, Martin and Sparke, 2006; Brett, 2000, chapter 1.

15. Overy, 2009; Garth, 2003; Winter, 1995.

16. Overy, 2009; Garth, 2003.

17. Matt, 2008.

18. Matt, 2008.

especially in the interior's decorative touches and furniture, the middle-class homemaker could create a sense of place, timelessness (or rather changelessness) and tradition, linked to both the natural world outside and to the history of the region and nation itself. Often confused by a later modernist historiography based on movements or styles, this 'period style' can be loosely identified by the then widespread veneration of the antique, hand-made, pastoral material culture of the past, whether English or French, or sixteenth or eighteenth century in origin.

The 'Period Style'

Through the elevated status it awarded to the 'authentic' remnants of a pre-industrial past, and its idealised relationship with place and nature, the Arts and Crafts movement legitimised the passion of the late-Victorians and their American cousins with collecting antique furniture and decorative arts as exemplars of a disappearing world of origins, cultural identity and authentic civilisation.¹⁹ Millionaires on both sides of the Atlantic from the late-nineteenth century onwards had imported vast quantities of architectural antiques, *boiseries* (carved wood panelling), paintings, sculptures, furniture, textiles and other antiques into their homes, sometimes incorporating them, as the Rothschilds did, into the very fabric of their otherwise modern but historically-themed palaces. As this fascination with the antique and reproduction spread to the middle class around the turn of the century, the London and New York antique markets expanded rapidly in response to an increasing demand.²⁰

Echoing what had become an expected linkage between accurate historical knowledge and an elegant 'period style' effect in the interior, even fairly humble books about the design and furnishing of small houses or 'cottages' after the turn of the century contained potted histories of furniture and, less frequently, textiles, since historical knowledge, particularly of furniture, appeared to be an essential prerequisite for exercising good taste in interior design, and this was encouraged by many design writers and architects.²¹ The key concept of 'civilisation' implied a historical narrative, and one that placed great emphasis on exemplary national or cultural achievements in literature, art and design. Responding to this romantic historicism, professional designers, architects and interior decorators developed an adaptive vocabulary based on referencing a vernacular, and quaintly rural English or American pre-industrial past, and combining it with all the modern conveniences and comforts required by their patrons, often tastefully concealed behind wood panelling or window seats.²²

A good local Australian example of this can be found in Carrick Hill (1936-7), a heritage-listed house and garden in the suburb of Mitcham in Adelaide. This was built for Edward (Bill) Hayward, then owner of the once-renowned John Martin's Department Store, and his wife, Ursula Barr Smith, daughter of one of South Australia's richest men, Robert Barr Smith.²³ The house was designed by an eminent local architect, Sir James Irwin, around a large staircase, wood panelling, fireplaces, windows and doors, which the couple had discovered and bought from the demolition

19. Cohen, 2006; and Muthesius, (1904) 1979, p. 194 ff.

20. Muthesius, 1988; Denenberg, 2003; Wilson, Eyring and Marotta, 2002; Stillinger, 1980.

21. Lees-Maffei, 2003; Jeremiah, 2000, chapter 1.

22. Davey, 1995.

23. Carrick Hill; Menz, 2002.

sale of a Tudor mansion in Staffordshire in 1935. The house and its contents were later gifted to the state, and still contains some of the best oak furniture in Australia, along with a fine collection of modern Australian and European paintings also acquired by the couple, who were friends and supporters of some of Australia's leading avant-garde artists and writers. The house and garden was intended to look like an eighteenth-century English manor house, but like the Rothschilds' much earlier and much grander homes,²⁴ included all the new comforts of the age, including modern bathrooms, heating, electric lights and a large modern kitchen.

Despite the occasional inroads made by fashionable modern styles like Art Deco in the late-1920s and 1930s, and the more obviously and increasingly modern, 'hygienic' designs of bathrooms and kitchens, the 'period style' in furniture and furnishing held a dominant sway in middle-class living rooms, dining rooms and bedrooms until well after the Second World War in Australia as well as on both sides of the Atlantic. As TH Robsjohn-Gibbings, a progressive British-born designer living in the USA complained in a short apology for modern design with the rather catchy title of *Goodbye Mr Chippendale* (1944), there was, by 1940, regrettably 'a young generation of Americans to whom it seems as natural to find antique and reproduction furniture in the living room as it does to find an electric refrigerator in the kitchen.'²⁵

This middle-class concern with displaying 'period style' in the interior had been continually emphasised since the end of the First World War as representing the 'best taste', and this was reinforced by popular 'lifestyle' or 'design advice' magazines like *Country Life*, *Connoisseur* and *Vogue*, which took on the role of socially conservative arbiters of good taste and 'breeding' for the middle class and the wealthy, or those who aspired to be seen as such. And this popular middle-class preference for the antique was exploited by many designers and businesses, including the larger department stores, who held 'exhibitions' of reproduction furniture and furnishings in large galleries of 'period style' rooms for their customers, to get a sense of what living in a 'manor house' might be like.²⁶ Generally ignored by architectural historians who have followed the polemic distaste of the modernist critics and historians for this middle-class preference for historicist 'brica-brac', it nevertheless remains a dominant feature of domestic life on both sides of the Atlantic between the wars, and is echoed in the majority of surviving examples of domestic architecture from the period. Emphasising the innovative work of the modernist avant-garde, strangely perched on Morris's shoulders, early apologists like Pevsner have bequeathed to us a strangely distorting narrative of design in this period (c. 1880–1920), which, while successfully breaking-up this period into a succession of significant 'movements', erases much of the post-Great War aesthetic rationale underpinning not only the 'period style' interior, but the cultural rationale of most mainstream architects and designers working in this same period.²⁷

24. Waddesdon.

25. Robsjohn-Gibbings, 1944, p. 3; Smith, 2008.

26. Dunbar, 2006.

27. Edquist, 2007.

Arthur H Lee and Sons

A number of leading American and British firms, as well as many established architects and designers, profited from this taste in ‘period style’ furnishing. For example, in 1903 the well-respected furniture manufacturer Gillows even opened a textile factory in France to produce luxury ‘period style’ fabrics to cover their fine reproduction furniture.²⁸ It is not surprising perhaps that some of the other leading British producers involved in this trade derived from origins influenced by the Arts and Crafts-led renaissance in textile design, including Warner and Sons, GP and J Baker, and Arthur H Lee.²⁹ Despite the impression given by museum collections that these firms were all producing individually designed examples of Arts and Crafts and then Art Nouveau fabrics, a large proportion of their business, especially after 1900, was based on the great popularity of antique and reproduction furniture and furnishing, a dominant trend that continued through the First World War and into the 1920s.³⁰ To understand this popularity, we need only glance at London’s popular newspapers’ treatment of the unveiling and exhibition of Queen Mary’s Dollhouse in London in 1924. Designed by Lutyens, the architect of New Delhi, this substantial dollhouse was made to a scale of 1:12 and contained miniature furniture and textiles contributed by London’s leading shops and producers, all in the neo-Georgian ‘period style’.³¹ Thousands of visitors flocked to see this marvel of architectural merchandising, and at least three commemorative books were published, with the interiors lovingly photographed and described with cloyingly patriotic sentiment.

AH Lee and Sons in particular provide us with a useful window on to the kind of business profiting from this fashion for the ‘period style’. Inspired by the example and teachings of Morris, Arthur H Lee and Sons was founded by the son of a family long-involved in the textile industry at Bolton (Tootal Broadhurst and Lee). As a young man, Arthur (1853–1932) had set up a workshop to manufacture high quality Jacquard-woven tapestry cloth at Warrington in 1888.³² His interest in tapestries was perhaps stimulated by his brother-in-law, GF Armitage, an architect and designer who supplied Lee with many designs for his venture, and also a direct link to Morris. While Lee did use designs by some other Arts and Crafts designers such as Day, Voysey and Crane to produce designs in the style then popular, he was also inspired by Morris to collect and adapt carefully worked-up designs from early historical English, French and Italian examples.³³ This idiom became increasingly popular after the turn of the century in both England and America, where Lee soon opened a branch of his company, managed by his younger son, Humphrey (c. 1905).³⁴

The bulk of the Lees’ work was ‘tapestry weaving’, that is a woven woollen cloth (once called ‘Arras’) produced using a special Jacquard loom where the weft is not uniform but stops on the warp according to the pattern. This is a very old craft in which English weavers had once excelled, and which Morris himself helped revive.

28. Agius, 1978, p. 76; and Muthesius (1904), 1979.

29. Parry, 2005, chapter 4; Parry, 1984; Bury, 1981; Bower, 2000, Introduction; Johnson and Moore, 1987; Mais, 1938.

30. See: Buckley, 2007, chapter. 1.

31. Stewart-Wilson, 1988.

32. Mais, 1938; Johnson and Moore, 2002.

33. Lee, 1967.

34. See: *Lee Jofa*, <http://www.leejofa.com/>; accessed 10 February 2012.

After many experiments with this type of Jacquard weaving, Arthur Lee invented a unique ‘over-blocking’ technique, which allowed a sturdy two-colour woven cloth to appear like a more colourful, expensive and time-consuming needle-point tapestry. Some of Lee’s woven panels involved up to ninety different coloured blocks, with a large section of their factory devoted to blocking.³⁵

Another more expensive, commissioned production of the firm was needlepoint tapestry, and the Lees supplied these to luxury liners like the Queen Mary, and also repaired tapestries for museums and collectors. One notable job was the creation of a specially commissioned tapestry cover for a love seat for the Princess Farza Rauf of Egypt, which required some 800,000 stitches.³⁶ And what is thought to have been the largest tapestry ever produced was created by the firm for the boardroom of the Midland Bank in 1939, an epic job which involved fifteen-and-a-half million stitches, which is said to have taken over seven months to complete, employing virtually most of the Lees’ 100 or so embroiderers.³⁷

The third area that the Lees specialised in, especially after 1910, was embroidered cloth of various kinds and embroidery kits, again following in the footsteps of Morris and Co. The bulk of their work in this area was for upholstery covers, curtains and wall hangings. This ‘crewel’ embroidery was an ancient form of embroidery English craftswomen had once excelled in, and the Lees produced not only kits, but also publications explaining the history and virtues of this kind of work.³⁸ Reflecting the Lees’ Arts and Crafts origins, this emphasis on the redemptive value of engaging in a skilled and time-honoured handicraft was coupled with an emphasis on the historical national origins of the craft and the patterns to be reproduced, and the unique durable and ‘timeless’ aesthetic value of the results.³⁹ This emphasis on a national ‘craft aesthetic’ is reproduced at length in the publicity materials of one of their largest clients in Birmingham, Alfred Allen and Co., who show-off many reproduction chairs covered in the Lees’ textiles (without naming the company), claiming that they were all made by hand by ‘their’ master craftsmen, using traditional materials and techniques.⁴⁰

As the surviving personal design books of Arthur Lee and his son, Thorold, show, the Lees worked in an ‘adaptive’ idiom, in a manner familiar to other designers influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement, with meticulous attention to detail and historical precedent, paying much attention to colour, ornament and traditional patterns (often from museum examples).⁴¹ A large majority of these were traditional patterns, of flowers, fruits, birds and leaves, and occasionally of other animals and people in a pastoral setting, creatively reworked from patterns popular in early-eighteenth-century Britain, paradoxically at that time a dynamic melting pot of Indian, Persian and Turkish textile influences and local technical adaptation and invention, rather than the craft-based world of Morris’s and Lee’s imagination.⁴² Arthur Lee was

35. Johnson and Moore, 2002.

36. Williamson Art Gallery, 1972.

37. LA; Johnson and Moore, 2002; *Midland Venture*, 1939.

38. Lee, c. 1930.

39. Lee, c. 1930.

40. Allen, c. 1940.

41. Sykas, 2005.

42. Lemire and Riello, 2008; Schoeser and Ruffey, 1989, chapters 1–2.

also devoted to the broader Arts and Crafts social and aesthetic agenda of beautifying the home and the wider social environment through skilled ‘good work’. Although the firm paid their mainly female workforce (often the wives and daughters of the men who worked in the ship-building docks nearby) on a complicated but traditional piecework system, they were well trained by the standards of the day, in addition to being well paid and cared for, and certainly much in advance of many the other larger textile firms in their treatment of their workforce.⁴³



Fig. 1. Prototype of an AH Lee and Sons woven tapestry hanging, where the over-blocking codes have been fixed to the pattern. Blockers would read these to select the correct colours, c. 1930. (Courtesy Baker Archive, High Wycombe; photograph courtesy the author.)

The Lees’ profitability was closely tied to the popularity of their products amongst a large international but English-speaking middle-class clientele. For a firm with such an elite type of labour-intensive production, the global reach of their business is remarkable, with up to sixty per cent of the Birkenhead factory’s output sold between the wars through local agents to wealthy middle-class homemakers in Australia, South Africa, Canada and continental Europe, with the largest portion of this going to the Lees’ company in New York (today called Lee Jofa), for distribution across the USA.⁴⁴ Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the global reach of this business in any depth, two aspects stand out in relation to the themes discussed above.

Firstly, until World War II their business in commissioned needlework woollen tapestries was surprisingly buoyant, employing around a quarter of the Lees’ 500 workers. These sometimes very substantial pieces, often designs based on museum exemplars, were commissioned by wealthy homemakers, institutions like banks and other companies, and also luxury ocean liners, whose owners and makers were their near neighbours in Birkenhead and Liverpool.⁴⁵ Secondly, the Lees’ exploited the popular aesthetic appeal of tapestry and needlepoint work to sell their other, more modestly priced woven tapestry cloth or ‘Arras work’. This enabled those unable to afford the more expensive needle-point tapestries themselves to incorporate woven tapestry wall-hangings into their homes, hangings which resembled in look and feel the more expensive needle-points. Along with the kits and publications on embroidery that the Lees issued, this is a telling example of what Werner Sombart once termed

43. Johnson and Moore, 2002, chapter 2.

44. LA; Chapman, 1955; Lee c. 1948.

45. Lee, 1967.

‘the democratisation of luxury’, in which the rich vibrant sensuous qualities of hand-stitched tapestry was reproduced for a broader, middle class market.⁴⁶

The success of the Lees’ interwar penetration of a broad middle-class market in ‘period style’ textiles is also suggested by their remarkable interwar publication, *Period Guide to Fabrics in their Relation to Furniture* (c. 1928–35), probably the most lavish, commercially issued ‘period guide’ of its kind. Many books have been written on the subject of period furnishing, and trustworthy information is easily accessible to all who desire it, but it is quite otherwise with regard to what we may call period fabrics. No standard works, no hand guides exist, to aid the man who would have his valuable old pieces, or his modern reproductions, covered with fabrics in perfect keeping with their style and period. However excellent his taste, he is inevitably at a loss. He would give much to know with what bravery of adornment his Tudor stools — his Restoration chairs — first faced the world — what light or sombre curtains hung beside them. It is just such knowledge that the publishers of the *Period Guide* hope to place with more or less precision before him.⁴⁷

Intended primarily for salesmen working for their retail customers and ‘collectors’, often a polite way of referring to the buyers of antique and reproduction furniture and textiles at this time, the *Guide* was widely praised in the trade press for its comprehensive nature, practical utility and historical accuracy.⁴⁸ First issued as a series of large-format illustrated cards by subscription, starting in 1928, it attained final form in 1934.⁴⁹ My own copy came from a now-defunct Adelaide department store, which is suggestive of its wide international distribution. As was readily acknowledged in several trade journals at the time, no other guide was as comprehensive or wide-ranging, and by the Second World War, it appears to have obtained, in Britain and the USA, a circulation of over 5,000 copies.⁵⁰ Only works of genuine scholarship could compete with the detailed information it summarised, and these, naturally, were not so easy to follow or make use of on the floor of the department store or in the home. Its systematic, index-card style organisation, illustrated and period-keyed layout made it especially useful.⁵¹ Following the structure of earlier histories like Macquoid’s *History of English Furniture*, the *Period Guide* was divided-up into sections determined by the reigns of the English Kings and Queens, and the ‘woods’ commonly in use in the production of domestic furniture in these periods.⁵² The *Guide* was both diligent and extremely easy to use, cleverly building its history of textiles (a stubbornly messy, complex and difficult subject) around exemplary period chairs, which were much easier to recognise than particular cloths or patterns.⁵³ As the *Guide* suggests, historical knowledge was an essential component of the cultural capital required by the middle-class homemaker. It was not

46. Sombart (1913), 1967.

47. Lee, 1928–34, ‘Forward’.

48. Furniture Trades Organizer, 1930: ‘the standard work of reference in the trade ... It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the *Period Guide*.’

49. Lee, 1937.

50. Warner, 1949; *Furnishings*, 1928 states that two manufacturers had already published period guides by 1928.

51. Cabinet Maker, 1930: ‘one of the most complete and artistic guides to period furnishing, particularly as applied to fabrics, which has ever been issued to the trade.’ This review was then reprinted as a brochure, Lee Archive.

52. Macquoid, 1904–8, and Macquoid, 1905.

53. Schoeser and Ruffey, 1989; and also Schoeser, 1986, introduction.

enough to simply ‘mix and match’ as became the case in the 1960s, since ‘correctly’ collecting, assembling and displaying antique and period style furniture and furnishing indicated a cultivated, civilised taste, a sure marker of social position and status.

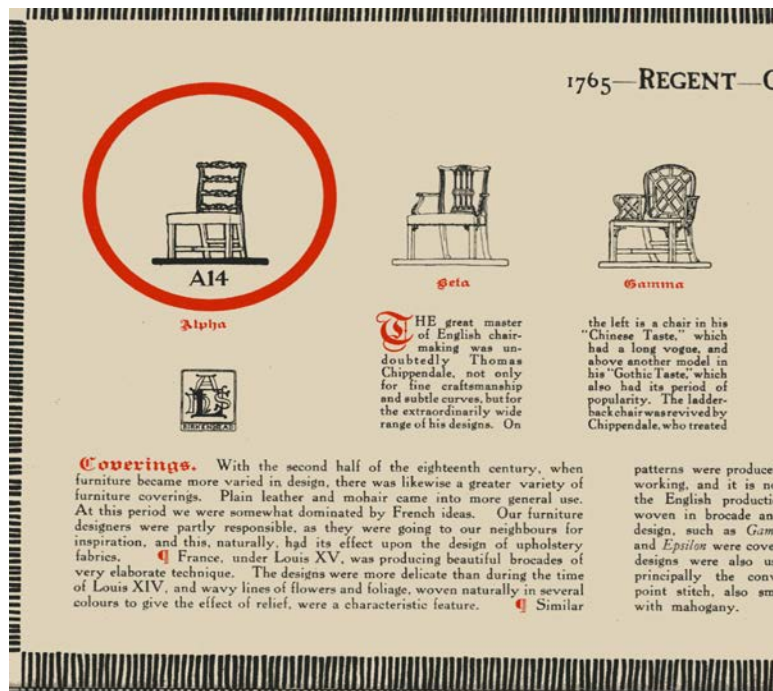


Fig. 2. The Lees' *Period Guide* Satinwood period, typical chair types (A series). Note here that the text concentrates on the chairs' likely fabric coverings. (Courtesy the author.)

Included amongst the card series of the Lees' *Guide* was one on 'modern adaptations' (D), which present us with a valuable image of how the Lees envisaged a tasteful, period-based interior. Drawn to scale and in elevation, the various textile elements were picked out in colour to emphasise their important role in integrating and harmonising the interior landscape of the period-style interior. From this little window into the 'period style' interior, it is possible to see more clearly what is aimed for: not a direct copy of the antique, but a signifying reference, one that positions the home in a specific national, historical, cultural context, indicating civilised 'English' (or 'early American') forebears, qualities and continuing virtues.

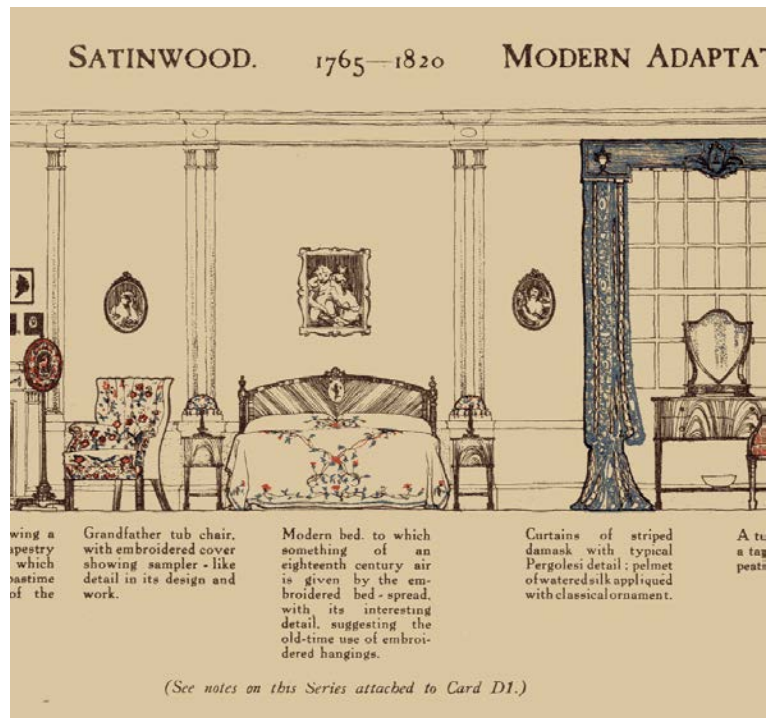


Fig. 3. The Lees' *Period Guide*, 'Modern Adaptations' card from Satinwood period (c. 1765–1820). Coloured fabrics stand-out against the line-drawn furniture, to emphasise their role here. (Courtesy the author.)

The tapestry in period style interior design

For a producer of luxury goods, the Lees were a large concern, operating in the now-largely forgotten world of decorative, commercial tapestry production. This part of their story has largely disappeared, possibly because of the modernist-inspired rediscovery of 'art' tapestry in the post-war period, which has greatly shaped and distorted our understanding of the more recent history of this decorative art. References to the Lees today exist only in the footnotes of museum publications on textiles, and then usually only in terms of their commercial relationship to famous Arts and Crafts designers like Voysey, Crane and Day.⁵⁴ The history of tapestry production in the early-twentieth century, like the corresponding history of late-Arts and Crafts architecture, has been largely shaped by early-modernist historiography, with most modernist histories of tapestry, especially those produced after the 1960s, overlooking post-eighteenth-century handcrafted tapestry production altogether, apart perhaps from Morris's Merton Abbey productions, or those of the Dovecot Studio, which are nevertheless dismissed on occasion as 'derivative' in these books.⁵⁵ What seems to be important in this literature is to reconfigure tapestry production as not only a handicraft of great skill (i.e. as nothing to do with mass-production) but as a conceptual art, a polemical strategy that subtly downplays tapestry's traditional collective, artisanal and often partly mechanised production. The Lees' operation, despite its massive scale and ubiquitous presence, seems to have fallen foul of this modernist revision of tapestry's history, becoming 'air-brushed' out of the picture, as it were. While there has been some interest in the history of Arts and Crafts tapestry workshops, scholars have been silent about the Lees' large and commercially

54. See for example, Parry, 2005; Bury, 1981; and Bower, 2000.

55. See for example Jobe, 1965.

successful Tapestry Works, possibly on aesthetic grounds, but perhaps more so because the Lees' reordering of a handcraft into a factory operation undermines many established assumptions about Arts and Crafts as a largely individually expressed creative ideology, and the modernist assumption that this skilled craft is at bottom an 'art' in all but name.⁵⁶

The aesthetic appeal of tapestries in the interwar period may now seem elusive to us, but returning to Morris's initial attraction to them, we can perhaps gain some insight into their continuing hold on the middle-class imagination, especially from the 1880s up to the Second World War. As Morris had famously put it, a tapestry is no substitute for a painting but essentially a different kind of wall decoration, 'a mosaic of pieces of colour made up of dyed thread'.⁵⁷ He admired tapestries as a form of public art, which could 'tell a story' accessibly, in rich, abundant, sensuous and vivid detail.⁵⁸ Richly emblematic, these tactile, frieze-like 'picture windows' could represent simply or in quite oblique terms, stories from a mythic, imagined past, often relating directly to prized national, commercial or familial origins.⁵⁹ This vogue for tapestries within the period style interior, I would like to suggest, can best be understood as part of a wider attempt to establish a sense of place and cultural and familial identity in the middle-class home.

Returning to the quote with which I began this essay, the tapestry was emblematic of a tranquil, sensuous and reassuring middle class domesticity, 'worked in rich, bright colours to a complex pattern, a Morris tapestry, not a medieval one'.⁶⁰ This imagined space needed its own 'invented tradition' to act as a domestic social and cultural 'corrective' to the modern world that lay outside, with its frighteningly rapid technological and social rate of change, its harsh economic and physical conditions, destructive rootlessness and irreversible mobility.⁶¹ In the middle-class imagination, the home had to remain sacred, stable, familial, fixed in place, with its identity expressed visibly in the furniture, wallpapers and floor coverings, crockery, glass and textiles, and the regularity, stability and sanctity of the rituals of family life.⁶²

Tapestries embodied all these qualities, but were especially redolent of a mythic past of origins and identity, like a woven window onto a vanished world of origins, alive to the imagination. This, Morris and his contemporaries had ceaselessly embroidered and returned to, as a strategic counter-weight to modernity and its social, economic and environmental cruelties. The tapestry's typical subject matter often told an allegory or moral story within a pristine, richly symbolic, pre-industrial natural landscape. Nature, in these richly textured and coloured pictures, was, as in a medieval romance, a sacred healing spring, which Morris and his followers (initially including Arthur Lee), would consciously try to bring into the homes they helped to furnish.⁶³

56. Parry, 2005, pp. 132–133. AH Lee is not mentioned in Thomson, 1980, or Phillips, 1994.

57. MacCarthy, 1995, p. 407

58. Cited in MacCarthy, 1995, p. 407 ff.

59. Midland Venture, 1939.

60. Raverat, 1952, p. 130.

61. See: Brett, 2000, chapter 1; Buckley, 2007, chapter 1; and McCracken, 2004, chapter 4.

62. Ames, 1992, especially chapters 1 and 2.

63. See: Rees, 1993, p. 117 ff.

The middle class today might still love antiques, might love the idea of buying and renovating an old house, and might treasure a handful of family heirlooms. They might long for the stability, sense of place and cultural depth this might signify to them, but very few would be drawn to keep an old tapestry depicting, for instance, a deer-hunt taking place in a wood before a moated castle.⁶⁴ The richness of colour and texture, the labour involved, the romantic pastoral scene depicted, perhaps involving fields, flowers, birds, horses or riders, like the novels of Walter Scott or the poems of William Morris, can now rarely entrance or hold our attention. History today is too detailed and emptied of romance, too realistic and too confronting to nurture such gentle and imagined dreams. We also cannot retrieve the imperialistic national certainties of children growing up in 1920s or 1930s Britain, or escape the burden of modernity, as Morris admits he did by imagining a better world in the Middle Ages, full of happy toiling peasants and craftsmen, of noble knights and ladies, strolling through delightful gardens full of ripening fruit and flowers.⁶⁵

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64. See: Matt, 2006.

65. Banham and Harris, 1993; Willis, 2006.

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