

GOLD

**PROCEEDINGS OF THE
SOCIETY OF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIANS
AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND
VOL. 33**

Edited by AnnMarie Brennan and Philip Goad

Published in Melbourne, Australia, by SAHANZ, 2016

ISBN: 978-0-7340-5265-0

The bibliographic citation for this paper is:

Gene Bawden "Lines of Gold: W. H. Rocke & Co. and the art of colonial retail persuasion." In *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 33, Gold*, edited by AnnMarie Brennan and Philip Goad, 34-44. Melbourne: SAHANZ, 2016.

All efforts have been undertaken to ensure that authors have secured appropriate permissions to reproduce the images illustrating individual contributions. Interested parties may contact the editors.

LINES OF GOLD: W. H. ROCKE & CO. AND THE ART OF COLONIAL RETAIL PERSUASION

In 1874 the Melbourne furniture retailer W.H. Roche & Co. produced a small but lavishly ornamented book on the virtues of the well-appointed Victorian home. Remarks on Furniture and the Interior Decoration of Houses consists of 54 pages of abundant Victorian hyperbole, carefully chosen quotations and two sepia photographs of display suites, housed within a cover of gold leaf, sumptuous Victorian colour and a catalogue of ornamental motifs.

The book belongs to a vast body of advice manuals and popular journals that proliferated throughout the Victorian period that ensured the material aspirations of the upwardly mobile middleclass of Great Britain were consistently applied throughout the homeland and its colonies. An interior architectural dialogue of familiar ornament and furniture would ensure a visual hegemony in colonial English domestic environments, and importantly, orchestrate accepted behaviour within them. Books like Roche's helped define the appropriate 'set' upon which to perform the acts of imported gentility; and his grand store on Collins Street supplied all the aspirational materiality required of a new city well versed in the semiotics of a modern commodity-driven economy.

The economy of gold gave rise to a unique customer for Roche. These were not people born to wealth and privilege, but those who had risen to fortune through mining, pastoral success or, like Roche himself, merchants who traded on the prosperity of others. His book carefully treads the line between the exclusivity of established privilege and the new-moned commoner elevated to wealth through luck and labour. Through analysing the Roche book this paper will reveal the nuances of colonial, gold-economy retail; and its ability to tap into deeply held, but hopelessly compromised, notions of class distinction, national alignment and good behaviour.



FIGURE 1 Thomas Edmund, *Collins Street Melbourne, 1853*, (Lithograph). National Library of Australia.

In 1852, only 17 years from when Batman and Fawkner begrudgingly agreed to a shared settlement on the banks of the Yarra River, father and son — George and William Henry Rocke — arrived in Melbourne from Wrexham in Northern Wales. By the time of their arrival, Melbourne had already been declared a city by decree of Queen Victoria in 1847, and anointed capital of the newly established colony of Victoria in 1851. Robert Hoddle's famous grid of wide boulevards and slender service lanes had been graded into the earth north of the Yarra along which were beginning to sprout the initial signs of a prosperous Victorian metropolis. The Victorian gold rush was well into its second year drawing thousands of "eminently adventurous and enterprising" residents into the colony.¹ Melbourne was awash with people, hope, money, ambition and the anxious civic vanity that comes with purposeful and successful settlement. If ever there was a city prepared to nurture a fledgling commercial enterprise intent on providing its residents with the means to indulge their desire for aspirational materiality, Melbourne was it.

Within two years George and William had established W. H. Rocke & Co. at 18 Lonsdale Street and immediately set about positioning themselves as the purveyors of choice for those seeking the best in decorative finery. Melbourne was, at this time, quite a rudimentary settlement yet the Rockes were confident enough to believe their future fortune lay in the exclusivity of fashionable novelties for the colonial drawing room. Their speculation was, as Henry Mortimer Franklyn observed in 1880, well rewarded:

Owing to the crude state of society in Melbourne at this early period of its history, the furniture used was of a very primitive and common kind, having no pretence whatever to grace or symmetry of form... As people began to settle on the lands, a greater demand for furniture began to spring up; and Messrs. W. H. Rocke and Co. were equal to the occasion.²

In 1862 the elder Rocke, George, returned to England leaving his then 26 year-old son William to grow the business into what would become one of the finest furniture emporiums in the colonies. In the same year William moved his operation to new showrooms at the far more salubrious address of 40-42 Collins Street. In 1863 William formed a partnership with the auctioneer, Horatio Beauchamp and trading as *Beauchamp & Rocke*, with Beauchamp's auction rooms adjoining the Rocke premises at number 38, next door to the imposing edifice of the Bank of Victoria. The Rocke premises would be consumed by fire in 1866 but rebuilt on the same location in a grander, less provincial style. It would be further developed by the architect George Wharton in the early 1880s as a grand four-storey monument to Victorian material luxury.

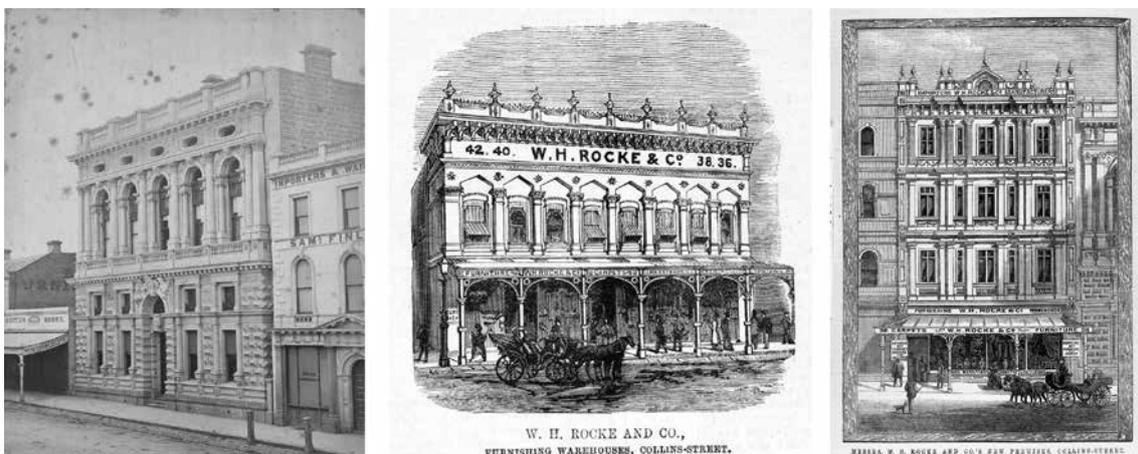


FIGURE 2 The transformation of Rocke's Collins Street store, 1863—1883. From left to right, *Bank of Victoria*, c.1863. State Library of Victoria; Ebenezer and David Syme (Publisher), *W.H. Rocke & Co. Furnishing Warehouse, Collins Street*. Wood engraving, published in *The Australian Illustrated News*, 10 June 1878. State Library of Victoria; George Wharton and Albert Charles Cooke, *The New Rocke Store*, 1883. Wood engraving published in *The Illustrated Australian News*, December 24, 1883. State Library of Victoria.

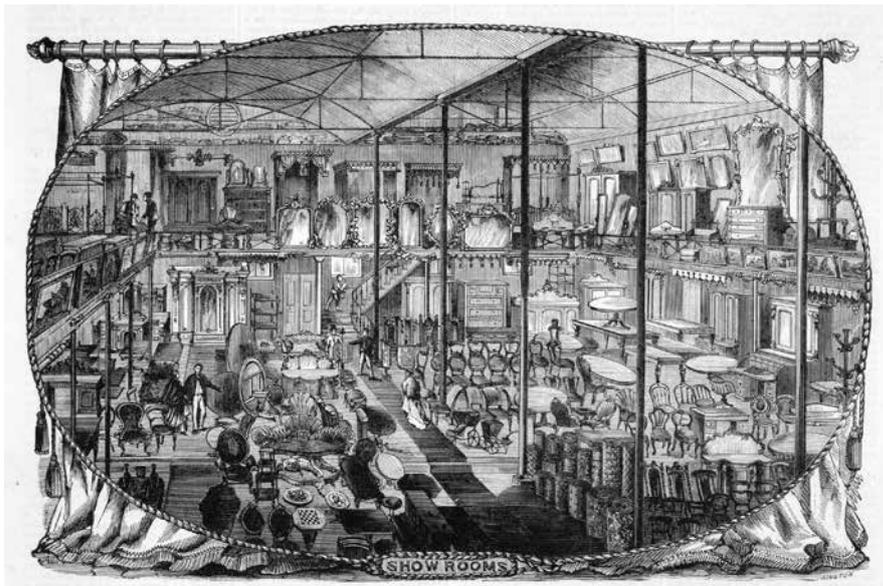


FIGURE 3 Charles E Winston, *Wood engraving of the Roche Showroom*, 1869. Published in *The Illustrated Australian News*, January 4, 1869. State Library of Victoria.

In its first 50 years Melbourne had risen from a “crude” dishevelled settlement to a sophisticated and internationally competitive metropolis, and within such a city, a migrant aspirant like Roche could elevate himself with equivalent haste and admiration. In 1880, Franklyn would praise both the Roche establishment and the commercial heart of Melbourne:

The latest changes in fashion, the freshest designs in furniture, are to be obtained in the greatest variety at Messrs. W. H. Roche & Co. ... There is nothing in Melbourne but the broader streets, the warmer atmosphere, the brighter sun, and the newness of the public and private buildings, to efface the impression that you are in an English city. Lines of omnibuses converge upon two centres of traffic adjacent to the railway station; carriages, with their liveried coachmen and footmen, are drawn up outside the principal drapers, jewellers and music-sellers.³

Roche and his fellow traders were the visible evidence of a replica English city that provided its burgeoning middleclass — complete with their conspicuous liveried servants — the equivalent consumer opportunities as their English peers. Shopping had, by the late-nineteenth century, evolved into an activity both pleasurable and critical to middleclass identity.⁴ To wander the galleried premises of Roche and Co. was a leisurely act. It was not an activity essential to survival, but critical to establishing, maintaining and parading one’s class status. As Andrew Montana explains the Roche store administered to “the pretensions of the gold generation, the enfranchised squattocracy and the city merchants and professionals.”⁵ The financial capacity that enabled the acquisition of ornamental domestic items clearly identified these Victorian consumers as belonging to a middleclass, well above that of servant or poorly paid labourer. But the vast array of expensive furnishings and bibelot available through the Roche store also permitted them the opportunity to position their wealth and rank in relation to each other, through what Veblen described as a selective process.⁶ Roche’s customers could selectively choose – or selectively eliminate – class affiliation via the price, exclusivity, quantity and quality of the goods they purchased. The upper middleclass could certainly afford Roche’s high-end bounty. The lower orders, however, needed to affirm their identity as best they could through lesser quality goods or simply fewer of them.

With extensive property in the most exclusive stretch of Collins Street, William Roche could proudly claim his success, and his position as equal to those ‘merchants and professionals’ he counted as customers. In 1880 he employed 150 workers; paid out £13 000 in wages; his acre of Collins Street real estate was valued at £40 000; and the stock it held, an astonishing £70 000.⁷ When an average annual middleclass wage hovered at £200, Roche was indeed a wealthy man, not merely an agent for the material needs of fortunate others. He was a member of a new antipodean order



FIGURE 4 W. H. Rocke & Co., *Exhibition Cabinet*, 1880. Decorative painting by John Mather. National Gallery of Victoria. Picture: author's own.

of good fortune. Unlike Britain where middleclass aspirations were pitched against the insurmountable riches of the aristocracy, the middleclass in Australia were its highest rank of citizen. Short of those who took office as governors, and the occasional visit by lesser royals, Australia was largely untroubled by the physical presence of the aristocracy, leaving the middleclass to assert an English social construct and assume the roles of moral bastions, civic leaders and community builders. And, Rocke could count himself amongst them. As such his authority on interior decoration was respected as that of a peer, not simply a furniture retailer in pursuit of trade. The great homes of Melbourne that had begun to identify the rank and status of its residents by the 1870s and 1880s were not all owned by judges, financiers and bankers. *Illawara* (Toorak, 1889) was the trophy home of Charles Henry James a one-time North Melbourne grocer; and *Ripponlea* (1860–80), the epicentre of Melbourne's society set, was the domain of Thomas Sargood, son of a city draper and himself a one-time warehouseman.

Importantly, theirs was wealth borne of the virtuous endeavour of 'work,' not inherited privilege. In Australia hard work was valorised at every social level. Wage earning was the source of respectable identity for men, and as Linda Young explains, conveniently integrated "necessity" with "honour."⁸ Be it the nation-building efforts of the pioneer, the industry of trades, or like Rocke, the managerial acumen that provided employment to a multitude of craftsmen, 'work' was the means by which colonial migrants could assert a life better than the one they had left behind in England.

Undoubtedly W. H. Rocke & Co. has secured its place as a reputable maker of quality in the history of furniture and ornamentation in Australia. His lavishly ornamented *Exhibition Cabinet* from the 1880 Melbourne Exhibition is a part of the National Gallery of Victoria's permanent collection. It is however, his much under-valued document, *Remarks on Furniture and the Interior Decoration of Houses* of 1874 that forms the remaining focus of this paper. The book belongs to a vast body of advice manuals and popular journals that, through high-production mechanised printing, proliferated throughout the Victorian era. These publications included Charles Eastlake's *Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery and Other Details* (1868), *Cassell's Household Guide* (1870), and MacMillan & Co.'s 1878 *Art at Home Series* that published Lucy Orrinsmith's *The Drawing Room: Its decorations and Furniture*, Martha Lofties, *The Dining Room* and Lady Barker's *The Bedroom and Boudoir*. These infinitely portable publications ensured the material aspirations of the upwardly-mobile middleclass of Great Britain were consistently applied throughout the homeland and its colonies. The burgeoning wealth and leisure of the middleclass that began in eighteenth century Britain, had, by the Victorian period, escalated to a vast population of English and colonial well-to-do whose familial provenance had not, according to some contemporary critics, equipped them for the aesthetic responsibilities that comes with disposable income. The new rich, monetarily enabled by fortunes made from manufacturing, agriculture, mining and canny investment — not aristocratic inheritance — required documentary aids to guide their good taste in a sea of ever

bewildering choice. Good taste, as some believed, was “the peculiar inheritance of gentle blood, and independent of all training.”⁹ The middle classes, however, required education.

Guidance within the convoluted landscape of Victorian bourgeois belonging could potentially be secured by following the advice of trusted manuals, not, as Charles Eastlake would bemoan, the vagaries of fashion or the sales pitch of shopkeepers. In *Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery and other Details* Eastlake states,

...never attach the least importance to any recommendation which the shopman may make on the score of taste...on the subject of taste his opinion is not likely to be worth more, but rather less, than that of his customers, for the plain reason that the nature of his occupation can have left him little time to form a taste at all.¹⁰

Fashion and its ever-fluctuating reinvention and mass appeal to contemporary consumers was, for Eastlake, at the very root of Britain’s aesthetic decline. However, as explained by Nadine Rottau, “taste was defined as an objective matter which could be achieved by obeying general principles of decoration,” and was therefore learnable.¹¹ Stemming the flow of poor taste lay in public education and the nineteenth century advice manual would provide its most accessible and portable tool. In Melbourne, Rocke would breach the divide between what Eastlake saw as a sales-hungry peddler of fashionable ‘things’ and a genuine educator of taste. Through his publication *Remarks on Furniture and the Interior Decoration of Houses*, Rocke claimed fluency as both a trusted retailer and advisor on good taste. As one customer to the store declared:

To look at your stock Mr. Rocke, to me is an intense disappointment. I have spent weary months in London and Paris searching and selecting furniture for my new house and now I find I might have saved my trouble. For all I did, I obtained nothing better than I can now select from your establishment in Collins Street.¹²

Unlike the prickly condescension of Eastlake’s *Hints on Household Taste* that regularly derided his public as “a body, utterly incapable of distinguishing good from bad design,” Rocke applauded his audience for their sophistication and desire for domestic betterment.¹³ Rocke positioned his book as “guide, philosopher and friend” to those “whose sufficient means and imperious good taste demand the higher style of ornamentation.”¹⁴ The language used throughout the document is one of comforting embrace, but also careful exclusion. Rocke was not for everyone. While there is scant reference in the document that the store catered for a variety of purse with “all the possible requirements for the most modest as well as the most sumptuous household,” its clientele was the colonies’ moneyed elite; “the pastoral prince [and] mining millionaire.”¹⁵ *Remarks on Furniture and the Interior Decoration of Houses* deserves closer observation not merely as a local example of the ubiquitous nineteenth century advice manual but one in which its language and physicality unite as a carefully honed tool of social identification and exclusion.

It is important to establish that *Remarks on Furniture and the Interior Decoration of Houses* is not a catalogue of wares. While reference is made to his products, and two pages are dedicated to photographic reproductions of display suites from the store, the focus of the document is literary. It is rich with abundant Victorian hyperbole and laced with carefully chosen quotations throughout. This is not a document intended to persuade everyone to peruse his wares as a common catalogue might do. Its density of Victorian prose and carefully edited quotations were intent on singling out a very specific, and in the context of Australia, a new, emerging and hybrid class of colonial reader.

The book is not large. At only 54 pages it is a self-confessed “little brochure.”¹⁶ It is, however, far richer in content than its size eludes to. Its language is high Victorian; that peculiar syrup of sycophantic compliment, and pretentious class-encrusted language intent on separating privilege from riffraff. Its opening page is titled “*l’envoi*.” Immediately Rocke positioned his book, and therefore his premises, with the educated classes who were able to decipher the meaning of foreign words, and excluded those whose literacy hovered only among common English phrases. It implores those readers whose education is beyond a basic one, to recount their knowledge of French. For them, the ample sprinkling of *carton-pierre*, *deshabille*, *salon*, *entremets*, *boudoir*, *jardinière*, *prie-dieu*, *papeterie*, *pendule* and *berceaunette* presented no literary intimidation. It permitted the ‘correct’ reader the right to indulge their knowing, and revel in the exclusivity of language that separated them from a less deserving underclass.

The book is divided into chapters that reflect the real estate privilege of the rich. Rocke provided the chattels for every conceivable room, from the expected drawing room and dining room, to library, breakfast room, boudoir and the ultimate in male indulgence, the smoking room. These later rooms were spaces of privilege and luxury, afforded only by the elite who had amassed parcels of land big enough to build trophy homes filled with rooms unnecessary to survival,



FIGURE 6 Joseph Parkin Mayal, "Drawing Room Group" in *Remarks on Furniture and the Interior Decoration of Houses*, published by McCarron Bird & Co., 1874. State Library of Victoria. Picture: author's own.

but essential to colonial pretension. Rocke would simply aid their desire to match their monetary wealth to equivalent material luxury; a far more conspicuous demonstration of worth than the secrecy of ledgers and bank accounts.

As an artefact the Rocke book is as sumptuous as the interiors he provided. Just as he employed the most accomplished cabinetmakers and artificers in his decorative schemes, he applied the same diligence to the production of his book. Rocke employed German-born Ludwig Lang—one of Melbourne's finest lithographers—to produce the cover of his book. Lang is clearly acknowledged on the cover. This is because Lang was a significant colonial artist, not an everyday printer. The cover, and its acknowledgement of artistic authorship ensured the book transcended any dismissal of it as ordinary. As Michael Rock suggests naming the maker, "legitimizes (the) design as equal to more traditional privileged forms of authorship."¹⁷ The Rocke cover, through acknowledging its creator, had lifted the entire publication to Lang's plane of artistic expression and above a common product of commercial endeavour.

Lang produced a design in a rich palette of Victorian colour: emerald green flourishes entwine with pink, violet and scarlet on golden backgrounds. Elizabethan scrolls, a magnificent Gothic monogram and modern ornamental type coexist in the same frame just as the mix of historical styles did within the high-end interiors that Rocke decorated. Walter Benjamin described the "eclecticism" of the nineteenth century interior as the "reign of a type of furniture that, having capriciously incorporated styles of ornaments from different centuries, was thoroughly imbued with itself and its own duration."¹⁸ The same can be said for the cover of Rocke's book. Superfluous ornament drawn from a historical but irrelevant catalogue of styles was coaxed into a happy union within the frame, and importantly, it reflected the self-important, eclectic interiors procurable from the Rocke store. As such the book belonged in his interiors, those luxurious spaces defined as drawing rooms and boudoirs. It was intended as one of the many beautiful things that objectified the Victorian interior. Its elaborate coloured ornaments and glints of gilt would ensure it, like its readers, did not find service in the kitchen or other rooms of utility. It was a luxury artefact that could confidently take its place amid the profusion of things that identified the riches of high Victorian dwelling. Its appeal would have been as ornament as much as literature, its materiality in alignment with the fetishism of Victorian collecting.

Within the Australian context, the Rocke cover design represented the heights of colonial achievement and modernity. Here, in a city so far from the acknowledged centres of cultural production, a book of such lavish qualities was able to be made. The lithographic reproduction was equal to any found elsewhere in the world, much like the Rocke furnishings that could rival the best imported furniture from Europe and America.¹⁹ The insertion of two sepia photographs lifted the book to another level of modern print production. The interiors were photographed by Joseph Parkin Mayall, who had opened a Collins Street branch of his father's salubrious London studio in 1870. Images in publications of this period were traditionally etchings or woodcuts. But here, the modern chemistry of photographic reproduction is exploited to present in acute detail the Rocke vision of interior splendour.

Throughout his book Rocke draws liberally on the works of acknowledged literary greats. No less than 40 quotations from 27 sources are recorded in his 54 pages of text, each one cleverly endorsing an aspect of the Rocke inventory or his own philosophy on interior decoration. Through careful and selective editing he demonstrates his own capacity for educated prose and aligns his decorative schemes to intellectual pursuits. Rocke gleaned his quotes from, among others, Shakespeare, Byron, Thackeray, Dickens, Carlyle, Ruskin, Poe and Longfellow. Through skilfully and selectively sifting through the words of these eminent men of letters, Rocke had aligned his own prose, and subsequently his interior wares, with the high culture of educated Victorian society. By so doing he also elevated himself above the ordinary 'shopman' Eastlake was so dismissive of. Instead he is perceived as a well-read man of learning whose retail establishment is informed by his exemplary knowledge and capable navigation of culture, literature and the arts. While Rocke was careful not to alienate his less learned patrons — "Not every man of wealth has had the opportunity of cultivating literary tastes" — he was also conscious of the prevailing snobbery that revolved about pretensions to cultural literacy.²⁰ He asserts, "A library for mere show is a piece of presumptuous hypocrisy."²¹ The quotations throughout the book implies his own "wardrobes of literature" were extensive, genuine, complete and beyond the reproach of 'hypocrisy'.²²

For example, the first quote belongs to William Shakespeare: "These are but furnishings—King Lear."²³

There are nine Shakespearean references throughout the book, though none are credited as such. The title of each play suffices as reference; the author goes without saying. Should a reader be ignorant of the authorship, it is evidence that they are not, from page one, the intended audience for the book, nor the intended customer for the Rocke store.

However, the use of the *King Lear* quote slightly dents Rocke's inferred claim to literary acumen. The meaning of "furnishings" is not, as the book would lead its reader to believe, in reference to the chattels of the interior. Those familiar with the play would know the word refers to the evidence of treachery laid against the outcast Lear by his ruthless daughters Goneril and Regan, and their respective husbands, the Dukes of Albany and Cornwall.

This apparent misrepresentation of Shakespearean text, would have done nothing to lessen the reputation of Rocke and his store. The inclusion of England's acknowledged champion of language was essential to identifying his library — and consequently his literary education — as a good and proper one. Though the quote exposes a patina of cultured literacy, it was sufficient to identify Rocke as 'learned.' As explained by Young, "the intersection of money and learning defines the field of taste, and removes it from the popular meaning of either personal or universal aesthetic judgement, showing it instead as a cultural and mutable construct."²⁴ The inclusion of Shakespeare inferred 'historical' knowledge, that elevated Rocke's 'taste' above the frippery of passing contemporary fashion. Like the Shakespearean texts, Rocke's opinion on taste could be read as timeless and eternal, and as such worthy of his customers' trust.

Grace Lees-Maffei argues that domestic advice manuals are not accurate representations of historical fact, but rather acutely reveal a history of "constructed ideals."²⁵ In the case of the Rocke book, he carefully crafts his own text to align his store not only with the ideal material aspirations of his clientele, but also the ideals of a 'correctly' gendered Victorian space. The role of middleclass women in nineteenth century Australia altered dramatically in the societal shift from 'penal' to 'respectable' and the domestic interior provided a familiar and comforting milieu in which to nurture the 'civilizing' influence of women. Anne Summers argues that 'safe and respectable positions were integral to restructuring Australia's colonial settlement.'²⁶ European women were positioned as morality keepers and provided the evidence of normalized sexuality and the potential for an undiluted European lineage. Their very presence, it was believed, imposed good Christian behaviour, and the home was the site from which they could best wield their influence.

A middleclass woman's internment within the home had been revered as her most appropriate position for most of the nineteenth century. Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House*, first published in 1854, provided the enduring

Christian metaphor for an English wife that was to become firmly established throughout Britain and its colonies. Within the confines of home 'the angel' could fashion a bunker away from the evils of the outside world and thus protect and nurture the moral milieu of her family. She was undoubtedly its vigilant keeper, but this did not, however, infer she also dictated its internal appointments. Victorian homemaking required the full attention of both husband and wife. As explained by Thad Logan:

The domestic environment was the primal scene within which male identity was developed, and for much of the Victorian era maintaining a home — which would be literally and figuratively ornamented by the wife — was a masculine duty.²⁷

In 1870s Melbourne, Rocke understood his market completely. His *prefatory* text defined exactly for whom his document was intended: recently wealthy men with a taste for luxury and need to demonstrate their financial acumen; and their wives desirous of the status and civility this inferred.

... with many persons it is an article of faith that, with money in your purse, to furnish your house is one of the easiest things in life. So it is in one sense. For instance, there is the frequent case of a man to whom has come a sudden access of wealth — a pastoral settler, whose unusually large clip of wool has just got top price in London, or a mine proprietor, in whose claim a sea of wash-dirt or a wall of golden quartz has just been developed — who forthwith vows that the wife of his bosom shall no longer be annoyed by the dinginess of her house fittings. Accordingly he gives her carte blanche to the best firm in Melbourne to send up and re-furnish her drawing and dining rooms from top to bottom. An Lo! The thing is quickly done. With small delay come rich furniture, carpets, hangings &c., together with skilled artificers to adjust the upholstery work, and the rooms in question are made things of beauty and a joy for the next five or ten years, as the case may be. Indeed no wiser course could be suggested to those in remote country parts, who are unable to visit Melbourne, or those who have little experience in household adornment, or whose wealth comes — a not infrequent case — after a life so busy as to have afforded no opportunity with the thousand and one elegancies and conveniences belonging to modern civilization and fashion.²⁸

The text identifies Rocke's particular Australian market: the urban and rural *nouveau riche*. In her analysis of the English drawing room, Anne Anderson describes the general opinion of this branch of the new middleclass in London; "New furniture smacked of new money... these trappings of financial success, a veneer of respectability, cannot disguise moral failure."²⁹ However, any condescension of new money in a new city like Melbourne was difficult to impose. It was peopled largely by migrants who arrived with little more than hope and ambition, not a cache of family heirlooms that revealed an honourable lineage. Rocke provided the new furniture that declared the good fortunes of a new life in a new city. 'New' was an unavoidable, but also an admirable colonial quality.

Within these newly decorated spaces, Rocke was determined to enforce the imported notion that certain rooms should assume a clear, demarcated gender bias. Dining rooms were predominantly masculine. He wrote, "it's chief characteristics ought to be of a more sober and massive kind than becomes a chamber devoted to lighter more feminine purposes."³⁰ The drawing room, however, was a woman's domain. It was the room that Anderson argues, "defined cultural notions of feminine identity — a physical and ideological space that framed a woman's actions and thoughts."³¹ In here, in a room shared by family and visiting peers, a woman could construct a narrative of respectability, loyalty, grace and devotion. Whether store bought or crafted by her own hands the tableau of decorative objects and furnishings within the drawing room implied her family's level of taste, cultural engagement and alignment to established middleclass systems of belief. "It must tend to exalt, refine and enrich the mind. And when wealth is at hand to heighten the ornamental effect, the case is all the stronger."³² According to Rocke, the drawing room was a site to impose the Victorian duty of 'betterment.' The more you could afford to impart on the drawing room assemblage, the more exalted you became: intellectually richer; socially better; spiritually higher. He describes in lengthy detail the vast inventory of a worthy drawing room: chairs, tables, cabinets, paintings, mirrors, consoles, glass, ornaments, busts and "a few precious morsels of antique art."³³ The contents appear in the highly orchestrated Matall photograph within the book. It is an extensive and purposeful arrangement of furnishings; cluttered to the modern eye, but each piece fit for purpose. A gilt *prie-dieu*, reflects the wealth of the owners, but also their devotion to Christian beliefs. The ottoman permits a lady to extend a comfortable seat to a number of visitors, centres them as the most important in the room, and permits them a position from which to survey the room's riches. Armchairs offer comfort to men, and armless ones do not crush the chastened fullness of Victorian dresses. Footstools extend a note of leisurely comfort to all. "Pretty little children's chairs, polished and inlaid so as to be eminently presentable" indicate the room is for the

entire family; its youngest members equally fluent in the requirements of elegant repose.³⁴ Abundant, layered drapery partitions the room from the conservatory, in which the occupants and their visitors could observe the wonders of the natural world and the floral bounty of Empire from the comfort of an interior vantage point. Encased within such a room an entire family could identify — materially and emotionally — with the widely dispersed global community of colonial Britons who understood the rich semiotic language of this highly prescriptive gendered space.

Among his reflections on the acts and semiotics of bourgeois interior dwelling, Walter Benjamin observed, “the art would be to feel homesick even though one is at home. Expertness in the use of illusion is required for this... this is the formula for the interior.”³⁵ Here Benjamin reveals the core of the middleclass home and, although written in relation to another continent altogether, is peculiarly relevant to the nineteenth-century Australian interior. Victorian interiors in Australia, like those fashioned by Rocke, were constructed according to a formula of English aesthetic dependence. To do so was an assurance of both subservient colonial compliance and equivalent English belonging. Within their rooms, layered with an inventory of material reference to Britain — floral carpets, ribbons of wallpaper, velvet drapes, lace curtains, elaborate *passementerie*, tea tables, what-nots, suites of brocaded upholstery, gilt framed mirrors, curiosities, needlepoint, collected souvenirs, wax flowers and china tea-sets — colonial Australians could sit and imagine themselves “at home” somewhere else entirely. A profusion of things obscured the view of their real Australian situation. Benjamin’s at-home “homesickness” is entirely realised in Rocke’s interiors; the melancholic, but not entirely unpleasant feeling that the room is ‘like home’ but not actually ‘at home.’ His assemblage of rich interior memories had not quelled the sickness, but intensified it. His enthusiasm for an abundance of decorative interior objects conjured an illusion that they and their owners belonged in a concurrent but entirely dislocated elsewhere. Rocke equipped Victorians with the know-how to create an alternative site of belonging that permitted them to believe they were acting and dwelling in equivalent, interchangeable English interiors. Importantly Rocke’s advice, unlike English manuals, could be read as an authority that operated within the same framework of colonial challenges.

For Rocke his challenge was clear: he saw himself as the conduit between the distant tastemakers and Australia; a direct and flawless link, without kinks, diversions or any weakening of flow in the consistency of unadulterated European high style. This was procured via “a round of observations of the interiors of the dwellings of the great and rich in England and the Continent” and by procuring “the most skilled workmen,” to “supply in Melbourne that which the wealthy classes at home could procure in England, France, Germany or Switzerland.”³⁶ ‘Home,’ notably, was not Melbourne, but its dislocation from its true site in Europe could be remedied—Rocke believed—by one simple act: shopping. Culture, identity, class, commodities and commerce came together in a potent union at his Collins Street premises:

All the articles that suitably furnish and decorate the abodes of those whom Providence has given wealth and taste, whether they desire grandeur, glitter and magnificence, or sweetness, simplicity, and repose, await the pleasure of the purchaser.³⁷

Rocke wrote in his book of “our role in the revolution.”³⁸ Far from being a revolt against English authority or civil administration, his “revolution” was to rally against a lower-order of provincial decorators and importers of second-class furniture who could not meet the aspirations of Victoria’s newfound wealth, and as Tracey Avery claims, their “desire to reproduce a genteel British domesticity.”³⁹ The “revolution” Rocke wrote of was one that had shifted Melbourne from a settlement of tents and dust, to one of grand boulevards and ornate Victorian edifices. Its rigid rectilinear grid was fast becoming lined with the commercial monoliths that visibly constructed the modern vernacular of a metropolitan city. This was no place for regressive, parochial backward glances, but instead, a forward lunge into a complete immersion in European material sophistication. Rocke carefully sifted out the readers who could not afford to participate in his revolution. His commentary on the decoration of houses abandoned the mass of Australia’s working and lower middleclass and focused attention on the newly wealthy. Through the purchasing power of this social minority Rocke could fashion what Baudrillard would describe as an “operational double:” a perfect replica of sophisticated English domesticity. Within Rocke’s class-conscious rooms wealthy Australians could settle.⁴⁰ With time, and if they permitted it, their space would shift from replica to real. The pretence of equivalent rooms would solidify into a physical presence; no longer an imitation or diluted veneer of English civility, but judged to be the real thing.

Endnotes

- 1 Richard Ernest Norwell Twopeny, *Town Life in Australia, 1883* (Project Gutenberg e-book, #16664, release date: September 6, 2005), 13.
- 2 Henry Mortimer Franklyn, *A Glance at Australia in 1880* (Melbourne: The Victorian Review Publishing Company, 1881), 264.
- 3 Franklyn, *A Glance at Australia in 1880*, 12.
- 4 Edwin Barnard, *Emporium. Selling the Dream in Colonial Australia* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2015), 24.
- 5 Andrew Montana, "Stylists for the nineteenth century: The Finsbury cabinet-makers Smee & Sons in Colonial Australia," *Recollections: Journal of the National Museum of Australia*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2012): 1-27.
- 6 Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Pennsylvania State University Electronic Classics Series, [1899], 2003), 47.
- 7 Kevin Fahy, Christina Simpson and Andrew Simpson, *Nineteenth Century Australian Furniture* (Sydney: David Ell Press, 2008), 160.
- 8 Linda Young, *Middleclass Culture in the Nineteenth Century: America Australia and Britain* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 71.
- 9 Charles Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery and Other Details* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1869), 6.
- 10 Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery and Other Details*, 107.
- 11 Nadine Rottau, " 'Everyone to his taste' or 'truth to material': the role of materials in collection of applied art," in *Material Cultures, 1740–1920, The Meanings and Pleasures of Collecting*, eds. John Poyvin and Alla Myzelev (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 71–85.
- 12 Anon in W.H. Roche & Co. *Remarks on Furniture and the Interior Decoration of Houses* (Melbourne: McCarron, Bird & Company, 1874), 10.
- 13 Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste in Furniture*, 107.
- 14 W.H. Roche & Co., *Remarks on Furniture and the Interior Decoration of Houses*, 15, 7.
- 15 W.H. Roche & Co., *Remarks on Furniture and the Interior Decoration of Houses*, 18, 9.
- 16 W.H. Roche & Co., *Remarks on Furniture and the Interior Decoration of Houses*, no page number.
- 17 Michael Rock, "The Designer as Author," in *Graphic Design Theory: Readings from the Field*, ed. Helen Armstrong (New York: Princeton University Press, 2009), 108–114.
- 18 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 88.
- 19 Terrence Lane, *A Souvenir of Marvellous Melbourne: W. H. Roche's 1880–81 exhibition cabinet* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2014) <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/a-souvenir-of-marvellous-melbourne-w-h-rockes-1880-81-exhibition-cabinet/> accessed 20 February, 2016.
- 20 W.H. Roche & Co., *Remarks on Furniture and the Interior Decoration of Houses*, 39.
- 21 W.H. Roche & Co., *Remarks on Furniture and the Interior Decoration of Houses*, 39.
- 22 W.H. Roche & Co., *Remarks on Furniture and the Interior Decoration of Houses*, 39.
- 23 William Shakespeare in W.H. Roche & Co., *Remarks on Furniture and the Interior Decoration of Houses*, no page number.
- 24 Young, *Middleclass Culture in the Nineteenth Century: America Australia and Britain*, 89.
- 25 Grace Lees-Maffei, *Design at Home. Domestic Advice Books of Britain and the USA* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 2.
- 26 Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1994), 342.
- 27 Thad Logan, *The Victorian Parlour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 33.
- 28 W.H. Roche & Co., *Remarks on Furniture and the Interior Decoration of Houses*, 5.
- 29 Anne Anderson, "Drawing Rooms: A backward glance — Fashioning an individual drawing room," in *Domestic Interiors* ed. Georgina Downey (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 39 - 60.
- 30 W.H. Roche & Co., *Remarks on Furniture and the Interior Decoration of Houses*, 29.
- 31 Anderson, "Drawing Rooms: A backward glance — Fashioning an individual drawing room," 40.
- 32 W.H. Roche & Co., *Remarks on Furniture and the Interior Decoration of Houses*, 17.
- 33 W.H. Roche & Co., *Remarks on Furniture and the Interior Decoration of Houses*, 23.
- 34 W.H. Roche & Co., *Remarks on Furniture and the Interior Decoration of Houses*, 26.

- 35 Benjamin, 218.
- 36 W.H. Roche & Co., *Remarks on Furniture and the Interior Decoration of Houses*, 14.
- 37 W.H. Roche & Co., *Remarks on Furniture and the Interior Decoration of Houses*, 14.
- 38 W.H. Roche & Co., *Remarks on Furniture and the Interior Decoration of Houses*, 13.
- 39 Tracey Avery, "Acknowledging Regional Interior Design? Developing Design Practices for Australian Interiors (1880-1900)," *Journal of Design History*, 21, No. 1, (2008): 41-58.
- 40 Jean Baudrillard, "Simulation and Simulacra" in *Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings. Second Edition, Revised and Expanded*, ed. Mark Poster, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 169-87.