

2023

## “Spreading the gospel of good taste”: Home Design and American Character

Anna Maher

Columbia University, afm2165@columbia.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/suhj>



Part of the [Social History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Maher, Anna (2023) "“Spreading the gospel of good taste”: Home Design and American Character," *Swarthmore Undergraduate History Journal*: 4 (2), 60-75. 10.24968/2693-244X.4.2.5  
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/suhj/vol4/iss2/5>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Swarthmore Undergraduate History Journal by an authorized editor of Works. For more information, please contact [myworks@swarthmore.edu](mailto:myworks@swarthmore.edu).

**“Spreading the gospel of good taste”:  
Home Design and American Character**

Anna Maher  
Columbia University

## Introduction

“To some persons a dwelling is merely a habitation, a shelter from the elements, a place to sleep. To others it is a home, a place where one lives, an object of affection,” declared the Committee on Types of Dwellings in their report at President Hoover’s Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership.<sup>1</sup> The Conference emerged amid the Great Depression as an effort to gather the top professionals to address housing problems facing the country. Nevertheless, these problems extended beyond the immediate impacts of the Depression, reflecting more than a decade of preoccupation with, study of, and emphasis on the home. The census of 1920 had revealed that the urban population outnumbered the rural population the first time in the nation’s history, and the rate of homeownership had declined slightly from 47.8 percent to 45.6 percent.<sup>2</sup> This provoked widespread concern among those who saw the home as a key element that defined the American character. As Calvin Coolidge stated in 1922, “Society rests on the home. It is the foundation of our institutions.”<sup>3</sup> In the wake of the First World War, economic dislocation, labor struggles, and racial tension afflicted the United States. Addressing the shortage of homes created by wartime production shifts was seen as one way to get to the root of these societal tensions.<sup>4</sup>

Intricately related to this shortage of homes was the question of the interior. *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste* recognized that a demand for guidance on design would emerge in the wake of this “great era of homebuilding.”<sup>5</sup> During the early twentieth century, a plethora of design pamphlets, magazines, organizations, exhibits, lectures, and more were established to fill this perceived demand for guidance. In this literature, there is a desire to promote “good taste,” a somewhat ambiguous and subjective phrase. The frequent use of the phrase is notable for its consistent implication of elements of class in American society including the moral value of the middle class, political citizenship, and professional cooperation and market considerations. Home decoration emerged as an important method to create an American taste that reflected democratization, emphasizing thrift, hard work, and intelligence in design across the class spectrum; the nation’s unique interaction with its own history and the history of the world; and the growing capabilities and responsibilities of a professional design community. Primarily

---

<sup>1</sup> *Tentative Report of Committee on Types of Dwellings* (Washington, D.C.: President's Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership, 1931), 21.

<sup>2</sup> Vincent J. Cannato, “A Home of One’s Own,” *National Affairs* (Spring 2010): 72.

<sup>3</sup> National Advisory Council for Better Homes in America, *Better homes in America: Plan Book for Demonstration Week, October 9 to 14, 1922* (New York: The Delineator, 1922), 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> W.G. Watrous, “Upbuilding a Great Industry Chapter XI: The Magazine as a Distributive Power,” *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, April 1921, 214.

through discussions of furniture, color schemes, and wall and floor decoration, popular magazines and guidebooks from the early twentieth century reflected a desire to establish an American taste characterized by harmony and cooperation. While this process was accompanied by many formal efforts, the dedication to presenting “taste” to the public at large reveals the way in which design was intertwined with issues of morality, identity, and the economy.

### **Democratizing Good Taste Through Thrift: Money and Morality in Design**

Design leaders of the twentieth century conceived of taste as something that should manifest itself in American popular culture. The idea that “taste” was inherently linked to wealth and social status was challenged as an outdated idea.<sup>6</sup> Lucy D. Taylor, Director of the New England School of Art and self-proclaimed “Progressive Women Educator” declared, “America is a democracy; its national art will be democratic for it will come out of the lives and hearts of the Every Man, not the Selected Man.”<sup>7</sup> The concept of democratic ideals transferring over to the establishment of style provides an interesting framework for understanding the rhetoric of home improvement. Loose references to the “Every Man” present the ideal of establishing a taste shared by the majority, or a broad swath, of Americans, but the emphasis raises questions about the particular values, qualities, and ideals the “Every Man” would contribute to the “good taste” project. Thrift, individual strength of character, and modest practicality emerge as some of the central tenants of a taste meant to reflect the democratic ideals of the United States.

Thrift, or avoiding waste and extravagance in spending, was seen as a moral good and thus something those of all economic standings should strive for. In 1927, a National Thrift Week was hosted in Washington to promote a new “thrift creed” in a positive light, combatting perceptions of thrift as being miserably frugal. The creed was made up of ten “financial commandments,” one of which was the creation of a budget to encourage smart spending habits.<sup>8</sup>

This ideal was supplemented by efforts throughout guidance literature to make accommodations for those of different economic levels. The report produced by the Committee on Home Furnishing and Decoration at the President’s Conference devoted a section to analyzing the capabilities of different income groups. After determining that the average family income was \$1,500 or less per

---

<sup>6</sup> James Wallen, “The Finer Kind of Retail Selling - Part I: Who are your prospective patrons?” *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, March 1920, 124.

<sup>7</sup> Lucy D. Taylor, “Better Designs: What a Progressive Woman Educator Says,” *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, March 1920, 117.

<sup>8</sup> “Follow National Thrift Week - Day by Day,” Box 336, Thrift Week, Jan. 17-23, 1927, Anna Kelton Wiley Papers, National Thrift Week in Washington, D.C., 1927, *Prosperity and Thrift: The Coolidge Era and the Consumer Economy, 1921-1929*, Library of Congress, 7.

year, the report advised that among this group, “the most careful planning is necessary for even minimum comfort.”<sup>9</sup> Not only was it exceedingly difficult to buy home furnishings at a low cost, but many low-income Americans were thought to have “discriminating taste.”<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the report recommended increased educational efforts through schools and newspapers to suggest small changes that could make a difference. Such changes included avoiding any elaborate carving when purchasing low grade furniture, as it would likely be done poorly, or repurposing fragments of lace and linen to create sets of doilies, table-covers, or bedspreads at a low cost.<sup>11</sup>

The Better Homes Movement, created by the editor of the popular women’s magazine *The Delineator*, became a national campaign under Hoover as Secretary of Commerce, and emphasized providing examples of houses for “families with modest incomes.”<sup>12</sup> The movement involved the establishment of demonstration homes within different communities to encourage improvements in homeownership by modeling best practices. The local emphasis of these demonstration homes meant that adjustments had to be made based on the resources and customs of certain communities, and thus the Better Homes guidebooks set up a framework through which desired principles could be adapted and cleverly met. When reviewing some of the homes from the 1925 campaign, the guidebook made careful note of the pricing and quality of furniture. A home in Gaithersburg, Maryland, was praised for keeping furnishing costs under \$1000, and one in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina cut costs by sourcing material for curtains and bed linen from local mills.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the campaign included lectures on “How to furnish the small home in an inexpensive and tasteful manner” and sample budgets for the family that would occupy the demonstration home.<sup>14</sup>

Most of all, these manuals advised on how to prioritize investments and use intelligent planning. The 1922 Better Homes manual advised, “A house can only be considered properly furnished when it meets the real needs of the occupants.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, homeowners were advised to prioritize practicality and avoid investing in ornaments, indulging in pictures, or choosing elaborate furnishings. By considering the cost of furniture before buying or building a home, “spasmodic and wasteful buying” would be avoided, and a house could be nicely decorated within a family’s

---

<sup>9</sup> *Tentative Report of The Committee on Home Furnishing and Decoration* (Washington, D.C.: President’s Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership, 1931), 12.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>11</sup> Lucy Abbot Throop, *The Home of Good Taste* (New York: Robert M. McBride & Co., 1920); Ruby Ross Goodnow, “New Ideas in Table Linen,” *The Delineator*, February 1921, 24.

<sup>12</sup> Better Homes in America, *Guidebook for Better Homes Campaigns: Better Homes Week, April 25 to May 1, 1926* (Washington D.C.: Better Homes in America National Headquarters, 1926), 8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-24.

<sup>15</sup> National Advisory Council for Better Homes in America, *Better homes in America*, 31.

budget.<sup>16</sup> Families with a yearly income of \$1,500 to \$2,000 were advised to budget twenty to thirty-three percent of the costs of their land and house on furnishing.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, the Committee report suggested the use of Mr. Leon Pescheret's budget, which divided rooms of the house into units and then allotted each unit a fraction in proportion to the relative importance of the items for furnishing. Using this method, overspending could be avoided and the general unity of the room could be maintained.<sup>18</sup>

In this way, there was an effort to promote the idea that good taste was not a function of how much one could afford but instead of how intelligently and diligently an individual worked to improve their understanding of appropriate decoration. This stemmed from an American tradition that linked home decoration to character; the taste exemplified in a home was symbolic of morals and individual personality. A pamphlet created to inform children about Thrift Week traced it back to Founding Father Benjamin Franklin, who published the *Poor Richard's Almanack* and was known for his smart spending. The pamphlet declared, "The early inhabitants in this country were thrifty because of hardships and from them we have been endowed with a glorious country."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, an article exploring California homes in the "Span-American" style noted that the structures reflected difficult circumstances of missionaries in the American Southwest.<sup>20</sup> Their challenges of labor, time, and money created a "noble spirit of intelligent economy" that was to serve as an inspiration for decorators in the modern day.<sup>21</sup> Overcoming adversity, such as a restricted budget or lack of design knowledge, thus provided an opportunity to improve one's environment and character. In terms of the color of a home, *Good Furniture* noted that it was not a matter of expense: "the knowing which colors to combine is the test."<sup>22</sup> Taste was closely linked to the female head of household, who was subjected to this test of taste in the decisions she made in her own home. Paint and wall design, in particular, were highlighted as affordable ways to personalize and tie together the home, and even presented as holding a natural attraction for most women.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> *Tentative Report of The Committee on Home Furnishing and Decoration*, 15.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>19</sup> "Seven Days with a Purpose," Box 336, Thrift Week, Jan. 17-23, 1927, Anna Kelton Wiley Papers, National Thrift Week in Washington, D.C., 1927, Prosperity and Thrift: The Coolidge Era and the Consumer Economy, 1921-1929, Library of Congress, 5.

<sup>20</sup> WM Laurel Harris, "The Span-American Style II: the Spirit of the Missions," *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, March 1920, 111.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>22</sup> "The Suggestive Value of Color Schemes," *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, February 1920, 54.

<sup>23</sup> "Fifth Avenue Moves," *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, April 1921, 184; "The Suggestive Value of Color Schemes," 48.

The home, a place closely associated with family and the rearing of children, was exceptionally important as the environment that influenced growing minds.<sup>24</sup> The way children's bedrooms were designed, for example, could produce "desirable or disastrous" effects.<sup>25</sup> Boys' rooms were to be masculine while a girl's room would be "dainty, bright, and frivolous."<sup>26</sup> Character through the maintenance of the interior was applied even to young girls: "Her personality, even at a very tender age, will clearly be disclosed by the way she cares for her room."<sup>27</sup> This reflected the wider emergence of a separate "child's world" in popular American culture, in which children were attributed their own rights and preferences by psychologists, the U.S. Children's Bureau, and department stores.<sup>28</sup> In the nursery, the guidebook suggested avoiding distracting wall designs as well as excessive ribbons and lace that would frustrate children told not to touch delicate items.<sup>29</sup>

An appreciation for restraint, simplicity, and above all, harmony in decoration, as exhibited in the recommendations for the children's rooms, allowed thrifty spending to be codified within the American taste. In the Span-American style, the use of empty space, simple plaster walls adorned with quality draperies, and tiled roofs all represented examples of how good taste could, and should, be attractive, economical, and practical. When reviewing a charming Long Island colonial home, "the true relation of utility coupled with beauty, but in no sense sacrificed for mere prettiness," was the most laudable element.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Lucy Abbott Throop complimented the "restrained elaborateness" of furniture from the period of Louis XVI, while the "splendor" of furniture under Louis XIV was not to be used in small or simple houses.<sup>31</sup> Thus, thrift was broadly defined and imbued with significance. It encouraged strategies like budgeting and planning as a way for common people to afford good taste, but thrift was also a lifestyle choice that demonstrated morality and justified the "goodness" of this taste.

Nevertheless, while the Better Homes manuals and Committee report exhibited an awareness of the practicalities of budgeting, other guidance relied on analysis of generally unachievable professionally done examples as inspiration. Academic Penny Sparke has demonstrated how Elsie de Wolfe, a professional decorator who served a variety of high-class clients, used images of ideally

---

<sup>24</sup> Albert E. Lyons, "The Better Homes Movement of the National Association of Decorative Arts and Industries," *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, March 1920, 114.

<sup>25</sup> National Advisory Council for Better Homes in America, *Better homes in America*, 39.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 86.

<sup>29</sup> National Advisory Council for Better Homes in America, *Better homes in America*, 41.

<sup>30</sup> "American Homes that Successfully Adapt Historic Styles to Modern Requirements," *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, December 1922, 251.

<sup>31</sup> Throop, *The Home of Good Taste*.

designed showrooms that in no way reflected the individual efforts and self-directed furnishing strategy she was encouraging for readers in her book, *The House in Good Taste*. Nevertheless, the “ideal” and “real” interiors did not seem to contradict each other, and the book still served its purpose of allowing readers to “participate in the fantasy.”<sup>32</sup> Similarly, a *Good Furniture* article on the Turtle Bay apartments of Everett V. Meeks and Clarence Dean, architects and professors, features images of their large and expertly designed homes, and presents them as examples of how to reduce exorbitant costs on nonessentials while preserving a modern and attractive look.<sup>33</sup>

To borrow a phrase from historian William Leach, the “democratization of desire” of the twentieth century meant that those of any class could yearn for improvement, particularly through consumer goods. Desire and working towards ideal home design, which might not necessarily be achieved, was valuable in itself. Thus, both practical and inspirational methods played an important role in reaching the common people. Following example and instruction, the middle class would use budgeting and thrift, prove their character in their homes, and be dedicated to the best in furniture and design, making good taste uniquely American.

### **Establishing an American Identity: Tradition, History, and Inspiration in Design**

This style was to be cosmopolitan, reflecting the best of design tradition in a harmonious way. Design sources during the early twentieth century interacted with and made judgments about the place of design traditions from Europe, Asia, and the United States in modern American design. Harmony was key. As Lucy Abbot Throop advised, “Very few of us have houses completely furnished in one period, but we do try to have a certain unity of spirit kept throughout the whole, whether it be French, Italian, English, or our own charming Colonial.”<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, each style had a particular context for which it was best suited based on a variety of characteristics. The Renaissance period, for example, could be hard to replicate and was too elaborate for informal rooms. The Span-American style, on the other hand, was well suited to the climate and temperament of the American southwest and successfully escaped “provincialism” because the missionaries had traveled throughout Europe and the Orient.<sup>35</sup>

A problem emerged, however, when specific design principles and techniques were ignored. *Good Furniture* expressed that a hybrid style of “doubtful

---

<sup>32</sup> Penny Sparke, “The ‘Ideal’ and the ‘Real’ Interior in Elsie de Wolfe’s ‘The House in Good Taste’ of 1913,” *Journal of Design History* 16, no. 1 (2003): 74.

<sup>33</sup> “Fifth Avenue Moves,” 185.

<sup>34</sup> Throop, *The Home of Good Taste*.

<sup>35</sup> Harris, “The Span-American Style II: the Spirit of the Missions,” 112.



origin and bad taste” threatened to define the American style due to the mass production of furniture to supply large numbers of European immigrants.<sup>36</sup> A common complaint was that the modern American designer had become an “artistic chameleon” that simply recreated antique-like items.<sup>37</sup> The term “period” furniture was problematized as a non-specific mess of styles that often went over the head of the average consumer.<sup>38</sup> The overreliance on “period” furniture and “antiques,” the magazine argued, was simply used as a tool to market furniture to the uninformed public and inhibited the production of quality furniture. Design literature argued that the role of the works of the past was to provide examples in skill and technique, so long as they did not have negative effects on contemporary production. Similarly, while traditional styles could be used to inspire modern home decoration, they had to be adapted to suit the practical necessities of the homemaker. An article on a colonial American home highlights this necessity. The “simplicity and sturdy strength” of colonial furniture was reproduced excellently, while there was a pleasant mingling of American types including Queen Anne and Sheraton.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, they adapted the Holy-Lord hinges, hooked rugs, and lighting fixtures from the earlier period in a way that complimented the Early American furniture.<sup>40</sup> Good taste involved the intentional use of specific styles based on their practical suitability for the home.

Furthermore, certain periods were representative of distinctive identifying characteristics that were not visual, but ideological, and thus helped facilitate the decision making necessary for good taste. The admirable chastity, restraint, simplicity, and practicality of the colonial American style was intricately related to the value of thrift. Similarly, Throop posits that the “sturdiness” of English furniture appealed to the American sense of appropriateness because they shared certain views on living standards.<sup>41</sup> Early American furniture, which included New England, Dutch, and American Empire, was complex in its origins, originally inspired by style brought over from the “mother country,” England, but with important regional variations.<sup>42</sup> In particular, Quaker and Dutch influence in Pennsylvania is emphasized, while American Empire furniture emerged shortly after the Revolutionary War in New York City. French Empire furniture, which was solid, heavy, and used metal ornamentation, was described as a “violent”

---

<sup>36</sup> Watrous, “Upbuilding a Great Industry Chapter XI,” 214.

<sup>37</sup> J.H. Rudd, “Does the Demand for Antiques Hurt Current Design?” *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, April 1921, 175.

<sup>38</sup> W.G. Watrous, “Upbuilding a Great Industry Chapter IX: Coordinating Design and Distribution in Related Lines,” *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, February 1921, 109.

<sup>39</sup> “American Homes that Successfully Adapt Historic Styles to Modern Requirements,” 252-5.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>41</sup> Throop, *The Home of Good Taste*.

<sup>42</sup> “American Homes that Successfully Adapt Historic Styles to Modern Requirements,” 256.

switch from the furniture under Louis XVI.<sup>43</sup> Furniture was consistently associated with political leaders and events to demarcate changes in style, which imbued its use with meaning.

Despite the rather broad inspirations that were identified, the adherence to a certain standard of taste was also presented as a form of “Americanization” for those on the margins of society. The Better Homes manual explained that campaigns could target immigrants and black Americans to teach them, in a rather paternalistic way, how to improve their standard of living.<sup>44</sup> Span-American style was seen as instructive because it had emerged from a process of “civilizing the Red Men,” which was equated to the contemporary problem of assimilating different racial groups.<sup>45</sup> *Good Furniture Magazine* presented an imaginary foreigner that made a point to show off the American furnishings in their home whenever they had visitors.<sup>46</sup> The sheer number of immigrants during this period and their desire to adapt to American interior design, the magazine notes, made them a large commercial market.<sup>47</sup> In this way, good taste was a signifier of broader political citizenship rather than just individual character, accomplished through its strategic use of the world’s “period” furniture and its extension of principles to immigrants and racial minorities.

### **The Profitability and Professionalization of Good Taste**

The middle class was not only the main ideological target of this taste, but the primary consumers of home decoration products. As *Good Furniture* made clear, educational design instruction was not only altruistic work, but profitable as well.<sup>48</sup> In 1921 and 1922, the country experienced a significant depression, and businesses struggled to distribute their inventory due to wartime buildup and a lack of demand.<sup>49</sup> This extension of design to the middle class, then, reflected an understanding that targeting large markets in the American economy would ensure the profitability of this American cultural project. The readers of the magazine were increasingly identified as “Mr. and Mrs. Average American,” and merchants, retailers, and decorators were starting to realize the necessity of expanding their

---

<sup>43</sup> Throop, *The Home of Good Taste*.

<sup>44</sup> Better Homes in America, *Guidebook for Better Homes Campaigns*, 11.

<sup>45</sup> WM Laurel Harris, “The Span-American Style of the Southwest,” *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, February 1920, 109.

<sup>46</sup> “Current Topics of Trade Interest,” *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, May 1921, 222.

<sup>47</sup> W.G. Watrous, “Making the Most of the Better Homes Flavor,” *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, April 1921, 209.

<sup>48</sup> W.G. Watrous, “Upbuilding a Great Industry Chapter I: The Story of Good Furniture Magazine,” *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, May 1920, 224.

<sup>49</sup> Leach, *Land of Desire*, 353.

reach to this new consumer base.<sup>50</sup> The strategy to do so was two pronged; first, the industry had to address problems of incoherence and confusion among manufacturers, retailers, and interior designers. Secondly, advertising and educational efforts had to be improved to impart this guidance more effectively to the middle-class housewife struggling to make design decisions.

Cooperation and professionalization were essential to creating a standardized taste that could then be effectively conveyed to the American public. The self-proclaimed mission of *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, a business publication, was to coordinate between manufacturers and retailers to improve the standards of American furniture and adequately meet demand.<sup>51</sup> On the side of the manufacturer, there was a noted lack of well-designed furniture at a low price point. “Modern furniture, especially in the medium and cheap grades, is apt to look as if it were encased in a hard and shining armor of varnish,” one design manual warned.<sup>52</sup> Poor reproductions of certain styles made from inappropriate or substandard materials plagued the market and made it difficult to claim the equality of access central to the creed of good taste. On the side of the retailer, there was an enormous variation of education, capacity, and ability to assist customers. While a demand for stylistic direction had emerged, the limited knowledge of individual salesmen left customers confused and purchasing items inappropriate for their homes.<sup>53</sup>

Interior design had emerged in the late nineteenth century as a profession and occupation but was still in the process of development. Questions about the appropriate training for design experts, whether it be self-education, bachelor’s degrees, or apprenticeships, dominated into the twentieth century. The Progressive Era had encouraged the application of scientific approaches and professionalization to various endeavors, including home decoration.<sup>54</sup> The first Bachelor of Science in Education with a major in home design and decoration was established at Columbia’s Teachers College in 1910, and the University of Minnesota provided a degree in interior decoration starting in 1918.<sup>55</sup> However, the interior involved a variety of fields, including architecture, fine arts, interior design, home economics, and more. Thus, debates about who held the ultimate authority on the matter were also common. A Furniture Publicity Bureau was established in 1921 as a resource for manufacturers, distributors, and the public; by 1931, the President’s Conference on Home Buying and Homeownership attempted to address these issues on a

---

<sup>50</sup> Wallen, “The Finer Kind of Retail Selling,” 124-5.

<sup>51</sup> Watrous, “Upbuilding a Great Industry Chapter I,” 221.

<sup>52</sup> Throop, *The Home of Good Taste*.

<sup>53</sup> *Tentative Report of The Committee on Home Furnishing and Decoration*, 10.

<sup>54</sup> Bridget A. May, “Lessons in Diversity: Origins of Interior Decoration Education in the United States, 1870–1930,” *Journal of Interior Design* 42, no. 3 (2016), 9.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

national level.<sup>56</sup> The conference, which emphasized collaboration between many different groups from the private and public sectors, was representative of Hoover's associationalism. It recommended creating practical working drawings of specific furniture types to keep on file for easy access by furniture manufacturers, the creation of various pamphlets for homemakers and technical workers, and six-week institutes for workers, which included teachers, industrial and commercial workers, and homemakers.<sup>57</sup>

The expansion of these educational efforts to homemakers was particularly important. If the average American was to buy quality furniture with a reduced budget, they would need assistance. Very few had the resources to become "intelligent homemakers" because their knowledge of furniture and design was collected from a variety of sources that often contradicted each other, and they were without the means to filter and judge this advice.<sup>58</sup> The Better Homes Movement represented one way to remedy this lack of critical taste awareness. *Good Furniture* labeled itself the "pioneer" of the movement in its October 1922 issue, citing its sponsorship of an exhibition of home equipment and decoration all "made in the USA" at the National Museum in Washington D.C. in 1915, their showing at Columbia's Avery Hall in 1916, the establishment of furniture galleries in Grand Rapids, and a home furnishings convention in 1917.<sup>59</sup> Various exhibitions followed the same strategy. The American Federation of Arts held traveling exhibitions that had expanded to include arts and crafts related to homemaking, and their secretary, Richard F. Bach of Columbia University, had an office at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.<sup>60</sup> The Architectural League of New York held exhibitions at the Fine Arts Building in New York City and extended membership to decorators, manufacturers, and distributors of home furnishings.<sup>61</sup>

Advertising also played an important role in conveying taste and creating demand. Some advertisements were criticized for pricing items very highly, which would appeal only to the rich or the "social climbers" by conveying exclusiveness. This exclusive approach failed to draw in the range of customers businesses sought.<sup>62</sup> Instead, advertising should be used to teach and create a new standard of living. Improved practices included being aware of the limitations of newspaper

---

<sup>56</sup> "Current Topics of Trade Interest," 218.

<sup>57</sup> *Tentative Report of The Committee on Home Furnishing and Decoration*, 8.

<sup>58</sup> "The Suggestive Value of Color Schemes," 48.

<sup>59</sup> Henry W. Frohne, "Good Furniture Magazine, Since 1914 Pioneer of the Better Homes Movement," *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, October 1922, 193-5; "Art Notes: Fine Furniture and Textiles on View in Avery Library, Columbia," *New York Times*, November 21, 1915, 18.

<sup>60</sup> "Sending the Art Message to the Public," *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, January 1920, 34.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>62</sup> Watrous, "Making the Most of the Better Homes Flavor," 212.

paper and ink quality, maintaining a balance of elements in the advertisement, avoiding crowding, and making best use of illustration.<sup>63</sup> Armstrong's Linoleum, for example, recommended using their product to maintain a common color scheme throughout the home. Their advertisement illustrated a hall at the top of the stairs with three rooms united stylistically through their flooring and included suggestions for an accompanying color scheme for bedding, curtains, and furniture in each room.<sup>64</sup> O'Brien Varnish Co. promoted their "Liquid Velvet" tints as a perfect color for a bedroom that was "radiant, yet restful."<sup>65</sup> These advertisements also included contact information for Armstrong's Bureau of Interior Decoration and O'Brien's Department of Decorative Service, which could provide guidance for how their products should be best employed in the home. In this way, the "democratization of desire" served an economic purpose. Standardization of methods, education, and goals among producers and retailers coupled with exhibitions and advertisements to inform and inspire the American public would create an economy that functioned more smoothly.

## Conclusion

In defining American "good taste," design literature had to determine how an American style could best represent cherished American ideals: accessibility and morality, a world historical lineage, and profitable economic endeavors. There was a desire to democratize the taste of the United States by incorporating thrift, strong character, and individual identity. Inspiration for American style was meant to include the best elements from French, English, and colonial American styles that preserved the idea of simplicity, harmony, and modernity. This appropriation of elements would create a distinct American taste that could spread to immigrants to assimilate them into American society. Finally, a "democratization of desire" expanded the market of people who longed and were inspired to improve their homes in accordance with this established taste. This required enormous economic coordination that was reflective of the broader associationalism and professionalism of the 1920s. Through these methods and expanded markets, design literature in the early twentieth century spread "the gospel of good taste."

---

<sup>63</sup> "What Retailers are Doing: A review of current work in home furnishings merchandising as reflected in advertising," *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, January 1920, 42.

<sup>64</sup> "How to Treat Adjoining Rooms," *The Delineator*, February 1921, 75.

<sup>65</sup> "Restful Color in the Bed Room," *The Delineator*, March 1921, 57.

## Bibliography

**Primary Sources**

“American Homes that Successfully Adapt Historic Styles to Modern Requirements.” *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, December 1922.

“Art Notes: Fine Furniture and Textiles on View in Avery Library, Columbia.” *New York Times*, November 21, 1915, 18.

Better Homes in America. *Guidebook for Better Homes Campaigns: Better Homes Week, April 25 to May 1, 1926*. Washington D.C.: Better Homes in America National Headquarters, 1926.

Blaikie Murdoch, W.G. “French Furniture from the 16th century to the early 19th century.” *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, January 1920.

“Current Topics of Trade Interest.” *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, May 1921.

“Follow National Thrift Week - Day by Day.” Box 336. Thrift Week, Jan. 17-23, 1927. Anna Kelton Wiley Papers. National Thrift Week in Washington, D.C., 1927. Prosperity and Thrift: The Coolidge Era and the Consumer Economy, 1921-1929. Library of Congress. [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?coolbib:3:./temp/~ammem\\_7FMf](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?coolbib:3:./temp/~ammem_7FMf).

Frohne, Henry W. “Good Furniture Magazine, Since 1914 Pioneer of the Better Homes Movement.” *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, October 1922.

Goodnow, Ruby Ross. “New Ideas in Table Linen.” *The Delineator*, February 1921.

“Fifth Avenue Moves.” *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, April 1921.

Harris, WM Laurel. “The Span-American Style II: the Spirit of the Missions.” *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, March 1920.

“How to Treat Adjoining Rooms.” *The Delineator*, February 1921.

Laurel Harris, WM. “The Span-American Style of the Southwest.” *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, February 1920.

Lyons, Albert E. "The Better Homes Movement of the National Association of Decorative Arts and Industries." *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, March 1920.

National Advisory Council for Better Homes in America. *Better homes in America: Plan Book for Demonstration Week, October 9 to 14, 1922*. New York: The Delineator, 1922.

"Seven Days with a Purpose." Box 336. Thrift Week, Jan. 17-23, 1927. Anna Kelton Wiley Papers. National Thrift Week in Washington, D.C., 1927. Prosperity and Thrift: The Coolidge Era and the Consumer Economy, 1921-1929. Library of Congress.  
[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?coolbib:3:./temp/~ammem\\_7FMf](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?coolbib:3:./temp/~ammem_7FMf).

"Restful Color in the Bed Room." *The Delineator*, March 1921.

Rudd, J.H. "Does the Demand for Antiques Hurt Current Design?" *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, April 1921.

"Sending the Art Message to the Public." *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, January 1920.

Taylor, Lucy D. "Better Designs: What a Progressive Woman Educator Says." *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, March 1920.

*Tentative Report of Committee on Types of Dwellings*. Washington, D.C.: President's Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership, 1931.

*Tentative Report of The Committee on Home Furnishing and Decoration*. Washington, D.C.: President's Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership, 1931.

"The Better Homes Movement." *The Grand Rapids Furniture Record* 42, no. 6 (June 1, 1921): 336.

"The suggestive value of color schemes." *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, February 1920.

Throop, Lucy Abbot. *The Home of Good Taste*. New York: Robert M. McBride & Co., 1920.

- Wallen, James. "The Finer Kind of Retail Selling - Part I: Who are your prospective patrons?" *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, March 1920.
- Watrous, W.G., "Upbuilding a Great Industry Chapter I: The Story of Good Furniture Magazine." *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, May 1920.
- Watrous, W.G. "Upbuilding a Great Industry Chapter IX: Coordinating Design and Distribution in Related Lines." *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, February 1921.
- Watrous, W.G. "Making the Most of the Better Homes Flavor." *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, April 1921.
- Watrous, W.G. "Upbuilding a Great Industry Chapter XI: The Magazine as a Distributive Power." *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, April 1921.
- "What Retailers are Doing: A review of current work in home furnishings merchandising as reflected in advertising." *Good Furniture: The Magazine of Good Taste*, January 1920.

### **Secondary Sources**

- Berglund, Barbara. "Western Living Sunset Style in the 1920s and 1930s: The Middlebrow, the Civilized, and the Modern." *Western Historical Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (2006): 133–57. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25443329>.
- Cannato, Vincent J. "A Home of One's Own." *National Affairs* (Spring 2010) <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/a-home-of-ones-own>.
- Leach, William. *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.
- Lees-Maffei, Grace. "Introduction: Professionalization as a Focus in Interior Design History." *Journal of Design History* 21, no. 1 (2008): 1–18. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25228563>.
- May, Bridget A. "Lessons in Diversity: Origins of Interior Decoration Education in the United States, 1870–1930." *Journal of Interior Design* 42, 3 (2016): 5-



28.

[https://design.lsu.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2020/12/Lessons\\_joid.12086.pdf](https://design.lsu.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2020/12/Lessons_joid.12086.pdf)

Meikle, Jeffrey L. "American Design History: A Bibliography of Sources and Interpretations." *American Studies International* 23, no. 1 (1985): 3–40. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41278744>.

Sparke, Penny . "The 'Ideal' and the 'Real' Interior in Elsie de Wolfe's 'The House in Good Taste' of 1913." *Journal of Design History* 16, no. 1 (2003): 63–76. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1316323>.