

LIVING IN STYLE

Fine Furniture in Victorian Quebec

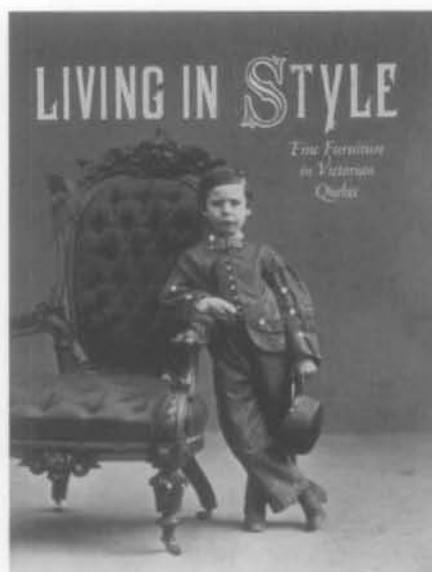
John R. PORTER *et al.*

The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts
and the Musée de la civilisation,
Québec City, 1993 527 pp., 60 col.,
489 b/w illus., \$ 95.00

(Version en française: *UN ART DE
VIVRE: Le meuble de goût à l'époque vic-
torienne au Québec*)

This handsomely produced, massive volume is an impressively scholarly approach to the history of furniture in Canada. Though its theme is "fine furniture" in Victorian Québec, much of what has been gathered together here applies to taste, fashion and attitudes in other parts of the country as well during the same period (1837-1901). Though published in connection with the 1993 exhibition, which opened in Montréal and then moved on to Québec, this is no mere catalogue, whose usefulness is transient. It is a permanent expansion of both social and material history. It is a book that belongs in the furniture section of every reference library.

The genesis of the work lay in a collaborative effort involving the Université Laval, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and the Musée de la civilisation. The research was undertaken and published to coincide with an exhibition of 114 examples of furniture (much of it Québec-made). In addition the exhibition featured a remarkably wide variety of decorative art objects, advertising



material, old photographs and anything else that would assist in recreating the milieu in which the furniture was originally used.

As Claire Desmeules, a doctoral candidate at Laval, points out in a chapter entitled "Domestic Worlds," it is "impossible to study Victorian furniture in isolation." Long ago the nineteenth-century British historian Lord Acton emphasized that a mistake too often made by historians was to look at the past through the eyes of the present. Through the research so thoroughly presented in this book it is possible to look at the Victorian world through Victorian eyes.

In his introduction Dr. John R. Porter (now the director of the Musée du Québec) raises the question of why there has long existed a strange but prevailing attitude that Victorian furniture was a

concern of English Canada only. The explanation of this "odd silence," he admits, "is not a simple one." It may be in part, as he suggests, "an ideological position widespread among the Québec intelligentsia from the 1920's until the dawn of the 1970's" that was sparked by a concern "to preserve historical material linked to French traditions," and ensure "survival of early forms of craftsmanship." Whatever the reasons, the present volume is doubly welcome in filling a serious gap.

It is pertinent to remember, however, that any real interest in an appreciation of Victorian furniture was not prevalent among English Canadians until well into the second half of this century. When my husband and I were married in 1947 and let it be known that we planned to have nothing but Victorian furniture, the art critic of a major English-language newspaper said to us kindly, "Never mind, you'll soon be able to afford something better." And a prominent dealer, from whom a number of our pieces came, was little short of contemptuous of our selection (a happy circumstance, since it depressed prices).

Even in England itself there was little interest in Victorian furniture until after the 1950's. One of the first tentative efforts to take it seriously was on the eve of the centenary of Queen Victoria's accession when in 1936 the London magazine, *The Antique Collector*, ran two articles "In Defence of the Furniture of a Much Abused Period."¹ But even as late

as 1958 Peter Floud could write, in a *Connoisseur Period Guide*, "There is hardly a book or even an article devoted to... Victorian furniture."² After that, of course, came the veritable flood that has been pouring forth ever since. By the 1980's James Stevens Curl was exclaiming that publications on the Victorian period, in all its aspects, were "increasing in numbers almost weekly."³ This present volume is a significant Canadian contribution to the best of the flood of material.

The nature of "fine furniture" - fashionable, often of exotic woods, in general costly - indicates the types of homes in which it was to be found: those of the middle and upper classes. For the purposes of this book, these classes are defined as the *petite*, *moyenne*, and *grande bourgeoisie* (terms not normally used by anglophone Canadians). A valuable, indeed fascinating feature of the book is the detailed listing, from documentary and other sources, of the furnishings of a whole range of middle and upper-class homes, including Spencer Wood, the Sillery villa that later became a vice-regal residence. The 1851 catalogue of an auction sale that dispersed the contents of Spencer Wood, as furnished by Henry Atkinson after he acquired the Sillery estate in 1835, presents a picture of rarified luxury. Scattered through the two drawing rooms, the library, breakfast parlour and dining room were antiques from William Beckford's Fonthill Abbey in England, along with

"London-Made" mahogany furniture, garnitures of oriental porcelain and Italian marble sculptures.

A dozen pages by Gloria Lesser are devoted to "The Homes, Furnishings and Collections" of the Montréal financier Richard B. Angus. Photographs testify to the opulence of Louis-Joseph Papineau's Montebello on the Ottawa River; an image of the yellow drawing room at Montebello shows an ornate example of the Victorian delight, the "whatnot." Other furniture traced to Montebello includes fine quality reproductions from the period of Napoleon III. It is important to remember that such reproductions were part of the Victorian world. A Montréal cabinet-maker, William Coysh, used to lend customers Aldam Heaton's four volumes of *Furniture and Decoration in England During the Eighteen Century* so that they could order exact copies.⁴

Not all homes whose furnishings are discussed were mansions. A particularly interesting inventory (1882) gives the contents of the Stanbridge East residence of John C. Baker, whose private bank stood next to his residence on the village's main street. Baker also had a private art gallery in his comfortably furnished house. The suite of furniture he purchased for the gallery was given to the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull by his great-grandson and the settee is illustrated in this book. It is, with a reasonable degree of certainty, attributed to the Lambkins Furniture Co. of

Riceburg, another Eastern townships village (near Stanbridge East).

The whole question of the furniture market in Québec, the Québec makers and their participation in provincial and international exhibitions is dealt with in some of the best chapters, written by Dr. Porter, Jean-François Caron, Daniel Drouin and Rénaud Lessard. They contain contemporary descriptions of the factories of such giants of the trade as John Hilton, who was to Montréal what Jacques & Hay were to Toronto. Also included is intimate and human material, such as the account of an 1866 shopping tour to Québec City made by Mme Jean-Charles Chapais, wife of a Saint-Denis businessman and politician.

Mme Chapais made purchases at the establishment of Philippe Vallière, one of the city's principal furniture makers, choosing bedroom suites in black walnut and oak and agreed to take a drawing room suite recommended by her husband. She was appalled by prices in general, rejected as "too dark" wallpaper her husband had selected, picked out something cheaper to go with the new furniture, and wrote home that she was "dying of the heat." The drawing room suite is in the Musée de la civilisation and "is one of the few that can be firmly attributed to... Vallière." The rationale for this attribution is given. One could wish all the attributions were so firmly supported.

Illustrations of furniture whose

original ownership can be established suggest that in general there was substantially little or no difference between anglophone and francophone taste in this regard. Allowance must always be made for individual taste, but any scanning of the many advertisements reproduced, for English and French cabinet-makers and furniture dealers, shows the same styles promoted by both. It was necessary to keep in style and it was an age athirst for novelty, with new styles succeeding one another in bewildering variety, or running parallel. The book makes very clear that almost everything was available in Québec, from Gothic to Eastlake, from Vallière's rococo-revival to Hilton's Renaissance-revival. It should be remembered, too, that French furniture had a long tradition of influencing English cabinetwork. As Edward Joy has pointed out, French furniture shown at international exhibitions "never failed" to excite admiration from English critics.⁵ This influence trickled down, in one way or another, to cabinetmakers throughout Victorian Canada.

Virtually nothing that can cast light on the understanding of fine furniture in Victorian Québec has been omitted. Even dining room etiquette has been discussed. Furniture terms are defined and copious notes follow each chapter. The bibliography is extensive. Illustrations include items as varied as sewing machines and pianos. With 15 researchers contributing, under the general editorship of Dr. Porter, some over-

lapping was inevitable. References to functions and furnishings of certain rooms, for instance, may occur in more than one section. There is an index of proper names, but a subject index would also have been helpful for quick reference. If a word of caution needs to be sounded in the use of this book, it would be that in a complex age, full of contradictions, almost everything stated by a contemporary commentator can be qualified by referring to another. But the amount of primary material presented allows readers to draw their own conclusions on many topics. This is a book whose usefulness is unlikely to be superseded for years to come. The researcher can open it almost anywhere and be rewarded. It is a monumental work.

ELIZABETH COLLARD

Ottawa, Ontario

Notes

1 G.W. WHITEMAN, "The Victorian Revival," *The Antique Collector* (Aug. and Sept. 1936).

2 Peter FLOUD, "Furniture," *Connoisseur Period Guides: Early Victorian* (London, 1958), 35.

3 J.S. CURL, "Book Reviews," *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* (Oct. 1987): 858.

4 Coysh's copies, with his name in each, are known to the writer, who had the information from one of Coysh's clients. The books were published in London c. 1889.

5 Edward T. JOY, *English Furniture 1800-1851* (London: Sotheby Parke Bernet Publ., 1977), 151.