OBJECTS OF DESIRE
Design and Society since 1750
ADRIAN FORTY
with 272 illustrations
Thames & Hudson
4. Differentiation in Design

In its 1895 catalogue, the American mail order company Montgomery Ward & Co. offered 131 sorts of pocket knife. The knives were grouped into four categories, 'ladies', 'men's', 'boys', and 'men's heavy pocket and hunting'. Although there were differences between the categories, the variations within each category were relatively slight. The catalogues of other nineteenth-century mail order companies, department stores and manufacturers reveal that it was normal for such dazzling ranges of choice to be offered in everything from pens to sewing machines or dining-room chairs.

The profusion has continued, though to a much lesser extent, to this day and has often angered design moralists, who have seen it as an abuse of design and a waste of effort, since it does nothing to improve human existence.* However, while a dozen designs of pocket knife might have served the needs of Montgomery Ward's customers just as well as the 131 offered, the company could hardly be blamed for over-production of designs, when such wide choices were universal. The diversification of designs, not just to suit many different categories of use and user, but also in the great variety available within each category, was so much a feature of nineteenth-century industry that it cannot be written off as the result of mere wilfulness and irresponsibility.

Although the handicraft methods that were still used in most nineteenth-century industries lent themselves to the production of many different designs, standardisation would have been as


Pocket knives for ladies and pocket knives for men. Some of the range of folding pocket knives sold by the American mail order firm Montgomery Ward. The ladies' knives are universally distinguished from the men's by their smaller size and slimmer handles, usually of white bone (instead of horn as was common for the men's). From Montgomery Ward & Co. catalogue, no. 57, 1895, pp. 440-441.
Masculine and Feminine


Throughout history, men and women have dressed differently, and even when, for example, women started wearing trousers or when ‘unisex’ fashions appeared in the 1960s, the convention, though temporarily interfered with, was never in serious danger of being abandoned.* Of the possible ways of classifying dress, such as by the class, age or race of the wearer, sex is the primary one, and the most common in histories of costume, for even though the design of clothes worn by men and women has changed, the dress of men at any one time and in any one place has almost always been instantly recognisable from that of women. J.C. Flügel in *The Psychology of Clothes* suggested that the reason why the sexes dress distinctively is to provide a warning against homosexual attraction in social encounters.* No such explanation, however, can be applied to sexual differentiation of articles purely for personal
Ladies' hairbrushes and men's hairbrushes, Army and Navy Stores catalogue, 1908. The ladies' hairbrushes are distinguished by having handles, and, for the most part, a greater amount of decoration on the backs.

Use, such as combs, watches and electric razors, which are hardly likely to function as signals of gender; their design is best explained through their conformity to accepted ideas of what is proper to men or to women — in other words, through notions of masculinity and femininity, which refer not to biological differences but to social convention.

Of the 131 pocket knives that were offered for sale by Montgomery Ward & Co. in 1895, 17 were described as ladies' knives. Although it is unlikely that there was any significant difference in the mode of cutting practised by American men and women, the ladies' knives were all smaller and had pearl or white handles; the men's knives were larger, and many of them had horn handles. The catalogues of nineteenth-century department stores and mail order houses reveal many other examples of designs which distinguished the sex of the user. The toilet cases illustrated in the Army and Navy Stores catalogue for 1907 were classified as ladies'.
Ladies’ watches and man’s watch, Army and Navy Stores catalogue, 1908. As well as being larger and having a leather instead of metal strap, the man’s watch has Roman numerals on the face, unlike most of the ladies’ watches, which have Arabic numerals.

The qualities of men, by contrast, were thought to lie in their strength, their vigour, their love of adventure and their ability to suppress emotion. These supposed differences, which betray a confusion of actual physical differences with attributed psychological ones, were to be found in nineteenth-century novels and scientific works alike. Even such a careful observer of the human race as Francis Galton wrote, without qualification, in his *Inquiry*...
into Human Faculty and Its Development (1883): ‘One notable peculiarity in the character of the woman is that she is capricious and coy, and has less straightforwardness than the man,’ a statement which echoes exactly the differences between the men and women in Elizabeth Gaskell’s novel Wives and Daughters, written nineteen years earlier. There, the feminine qualities represented in Molly Gibson are moral virtue, sensitivity and susceptibility to illness; in her stepsister, Cynthia Kirkpatrick, they are beauty and inconstancy. The leading men in the novel, Dr Gibson and Roger Hamley, are distinguished by their directness, by their dedication to a greater purpose (one to medicine, the other to science), by their energy and vigour, and by their capacity to surmount emotion. Roger Hamley’s brother, Osborne, however, lacked all of these qualities – and accordingly did not survive to the end of the book.

Few statements can express the great distance that lay between the Victorian masculine and feminine ideals more succinctly than the following, from the recollections of a septuagenarian American, writing in 1910:

‘Nature made woman weaker, physically and mentally, than man, and also better and more refined. Man, compared with her is coarse and strong and aggressive.’

Because there is little evidence for such firm opinions as this having been expressed before the nineteenth century, it seems that masculinity and femininity took on these distinctive characteristics in the course of the century. The characteristics did not exist as realities, but as ideas; to live comfortably with them, people needed evidence of their truth. Fiction, education and religion all contributed and so, too, did design. The differences between the Army and Navy Stores toilet cases corresponded exactly to the differences that were said to exist between men and women: tough and rugged as against delicate and refined. However, unlike the other bearers of this ideology, which relied heavily upon words, design was more potent, for it provided enduring, visible and tangible signs of the differences between men and women as they were held to exist.
Childhood

Just as design could embody distinctions between masculine and feminine, so it could also express assumptions about the nature of childhood. The crockery and furniture intended for middle-class children that manufacturers first began to produce in quantity at the very end of the nineteenth century were characteristically painted in pastel shades or decorated with pictures of animals or scenes from nursery rhymes. These items would rarely, if ever, have been bought by children themselves, and their appearance must have had less to do with children's own desires than with adults' wishes to perceive children's needs as unlike their own.

How childhood came to be seen as a condition, not simply of weakness, but also of innocence, naivety and virtue has been discussed by the French historian Philippe Ariès in his book Centuries of Childhood. Even if Ariès is correct in placing the major changes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it is clear that the ideas did not stop evolving then. The growing belief in the absolute goodness of childhood culminated in the appallingly sentimental descriptions of childhood innocence that are to be found in turn-of-the-century literature; only with the discoveries of psychoanalysis did ideas about the nature of childhood start to change.

Signs of the changes in perception can be seen in the way children have been depicted. In a mid-eighteenth century portrait, The James Family by Arthur Devis, the daughters are given equal prominence with the adults in the composition and are dressed as miniature adults. C.R. Leslie's portrait of the Grosvenor family painted in 1831, makes the children the centre of the family's attention, but distinguishes the younger ones by their dress: the small boy near the left of the picture wears not adult clothes but a frock, a distinctive mark of childhood. These paintings present

a reflection of the general tendency of the nineteenth century to be on the whole more inclined than earlier centuries both to treat childhood as a privileged state and to stress its differences from adulthood.

These changes, which can be documented in the child-rearing manuals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, were visible particularly in dress. There is also evidence that toys, games and books for children began to be produced commercially in the late eighteenth century, but there are few signs of specially-designed furniture or crockery, apart from cribs and cradles. The pattern books of eighteenth and early nineteenth century cabinetmakers and upholsterers do not contain nursery furniture, which they were only rarely called upon to supply. However, nursery furniture had been recognised as a special category by the time that J.C. Loudon's Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture was first published in 1833. Among its very thorough descriptions of furniture designs and uses, there was a short section on nursery furniture. Most of the items were miniature versions of standard cane and Windsor chairs, the same as appeared from the middle of the century in the catalogues of large furniture manufacturers. A few, however, were not simply smaller versions of adult furniture, but were specifically for children. One of these, illustrated by Loudon, was the Astley Cooper chair, named after the surgeon who had designed it to make children sit up straight at table. Only at the very end of the century were there entire ranges of nursery furniture that were different from those for adults, not only in scale but also in form and appearance. Some of these new articles, such as the purpose-designed toy cupboards, specifically filled children's needs, some offered the advantage of being hygienic and easy to clean, while others were decorated with pictures of
Nursery furniture. Purpose-designed chairs of various types for the nursery. The Astley Cooper chair (bottom left) was intended to make children sit up straight at table. From J.C. Loudon, *Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture*, 1857, p.1086.

Nursery cups, mugs and beaker, decorated with animals. From Army and Navy Stores catalogue, 1908.

**NURSERY CHINA.**

*English China. Coloured "Toys" Decoration, Gilt Edges.*

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<td>Mug</td>
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*Tea Plate to match, 0/6 each.*
Nursery furniture, Heal’s, c.1914. Heal’s made a full range of nursery furniture, including not only chairs but tables, cupboards and chests of drawers. From Heal & Co., The Nursery Book, n.d. [c.1914].

Among other things, these developments were an extension of the distinctions between childhood and adulthood that had already become accepted. The more convinced people became of the innocence and virtue of childhood, qualities that are by no means naturally evident in children, the more reliant they became on external physical signs for corroboration of their beliefs; hence, for example, the choice of animals such as rabbits and hedgehogs...
to distinguish children's utensils. Where birds and mammals had appeared on china for adults, the association had tended to be with hunting, but the motifs on children's china were different, for the animals were anthropomorphised and the children were evidently meant to empathise with them. It is possible that the choice of these symbols to indicate childishness was associated with the stress that was placed in the late nineteenth century on play as an essential activity for children. That this was a middle class concern is illustrated by the observations about working-class childhood made by visitors to the new Board schools set up in Britain under the Education Act of 1870. These visitors reported being 'pained by the utter unchildlikeness of the street children,' and in one area of London, Bermondsey, a Children's Guild of Play was organised 'to make them little children again, and fill their minds with real child's play'. Games where children imitated animals were thought particularly appropriate, and it may be because animals (especially rabbits) provided such good models for playful and hence childish behaviour that they appeared so often in children's stories and on articles for children's use, like the nursery wares that the Shelley Pottery began to produce in Britain in 1902.

A few nursery articles, like the Astley Cooper chair, were designed to influence the physical development of children, but most of the special furniture and utensils had no bearing at all upon children's health or physique. For middle-class families to spend unprecedented sums on specially designed and decorated nursery articles that served no hygienic or physical purpose can only be explained by changes in ideas about the needs of childhood. The introduction to the Heal's 1914 catalogue of nursery furniture, hinted at just this:
Teapot as Mushroom House from a nursery teaset, Shelley Potteries, 1926, designed by Mabel Lucie Attwell. Nursery china taken to its most whimsical extremes.

‘Formerly the children, even in the families of the well-to-do, were relegated to an attic or some room not thought sufficiently good for any other purpose, furnished with things discarded from other rooms. Nothing was placed there because it was specially suitable, but rather that it had become unsuitable or too dilapidated elsewhere.

‘Now the nursery is carefully chosen, well lighted and well planned. The aspect, size, ventilation and general cheerfulness considered, in short everything is done to make the nursery a pleasant and convenient place, suitable to the needs of the occupants, and in every way a fit training ground, both physical and moral, for the young.

‘Children are admittedly very susceptible to their environment, therefore, how important it is to surround them with things at once beautiful and useful. Place a child in the midst of bright and cheerful things and you go a long way towards making him happy and good-tempered; it is difficult to cultivate these virtues in a gloomy setting.’*

If, as Heal’s argued, the newly discovered needs of childhood demanded a special environment, the practical effect of applying this principle to design was to endow what were otherwise no more than speculations about child psychology with the character of objective truth, and to remove childhood further from adulthood than it had ever been before.

Important though the development of social class has been historically, class distinctions in design are far from easy to trace. This has been partly because, at least until recently, distinctions between classes have been marked so clearly by different patterns of consumption that distinctions in design would have been irrelevant. However, the one commodity universal to all classes is dress, which therefore offers a promising subject in which to discuss class differentiation. Costume has long been regarded as an important social indicator, but never more than it was by the Victorians. Mrs Merrifield, in her book *Dress as a Fine Art* (1854), listed its

function of marking the wearer’s station in society third after the needs of decency and warmth.* Part of the reason for the nineteenth-century preoccupation with this function was the fact that the customary social distinctions in dress were increasingly being ignored or flouted. The development of cheap ready-to-wear tailoring made it possible for men of all ranks to wear virtually identical clothing. As the French Journal des Tailleurs commented on the dress of visitors to the Paris Exhibition of 1855:

‘Between the black coat of M. Rothschild and the black coat of his lowest clerk, there are only imperceptible nuances which could be appreciated only by a tailor’s apprentice – M. Rothschild’s coat probably comes from the Renard workrooms and cost him 180 francs. The clerk’s coat without doubt was bought at La Belle Jardinière and cost about 35 francs. For the present, that is the only difference, only M. Rothschild’s coat will stay black, and the clerk’s will turn from blue to dirty grey. M. Rothschild is also a little more free in his movements.’* 

Because costume expressed conflicting desires to obscure social distinctions and to make them apparent, it is by no means a straightforward example of the expression of class structures in design and is complicated by the fact that the working classes frequently wore second-hand clothes. The only kind of clothing specific to the working class were the slop-made jackets and trousers sold by the clothing warehouses as working clothes.* These cheap, loose-fitting clothes were cut from jean, fustian or moleskin; in practice, those who wore them would have been identified as working class, but they were neither designed nor chosen with this intention in mind.

A more rewarding subject for comparison is textiles, as printed cottons were among the first industrially made products to be sold to all classes. In the eighteenth century, printed cottons had been relatively expensive and fashionable wear for middle and upper-class women. Although printed cottons might have been bought by the middle classes for their servants to wear, as they were by Parson Woodforde, who recorded in 1801 buying ‘2 Cotton Gowns for my two maids, of Pink and White, 17 Yards at 2/6d, £2.2.6d’,* they would not have been bought by working-class women themselves. The cotton print dresses worn by working-class women would generally have been secondhand or cast-offs. It was more usual, though, for working-class people to wear woollen rather than cotton clothing.*

With the great expansion of the Lancashire cotton industry early in the nineteenth century, the market changed. For the first time, working-class women could buy new cotton dress material for themselves, and they did so on such a scale that by 1818 they were said to constitute almost the entire home market for the printed cotton trade. A London draper reported in 1818 that printed fabrics ‘... are worn principally by servants and the lower class of people.’* Sales of printed cottons to middle-class customers had declined in the 1800s and 1810s because of the fashion for wearing plain white dresses which was inspired, it was said, by the wish to imitate the form of classical figures. Although printed cottons came back into fashion in the 1820s, the working classes still dominated the home market.
As the manufacturers themselves recognised, the market was now divided between working-class custom for prints mainly on calico, and fashionable buyers of prints on superior cottons. * In theory, the same designs could have been printed on any quality of fabric, but, in practice, the printers used different designs for the two markets. Certain patterns known to be popular with the working class were produced largely for that market. * According to evidence given to a Select Committee in 1818, the wearing of gingham, both woven and printed, was normally restricted to the working class. * An engraving of the interior of a cotton mill in the 1830s shows a millhand dressed in gingham and another in striped cotton, suggesting that these patterns were characteristic working-class wear. According to evidence given in 1840, a large class of simple prints, particularly Bengal stripes and green or navy blue with white spots, were steadily in demand with the working class. * That such patterns typified working class wear in the 1840s is confirmed by the description of a maid in Henry and Augustus Mayhew’s satirical novel The Greatest Plague in Life, published in 1847:

‘When the conceited bit of goods came after the station, she looked so clean, tidy and respectable, and had on such a nice plain cotton gown, of only one colour – being a nice white spot on a dark green ground . . . that I felt quite charmed at seeing her dressed so thoroughly like what a respectable servant ought to be.’ *

Apart from the familiar stripe and spot patterns, it is not possible to identify from the surviving pattern books which designs were aimed at a working-class market. Certain firms did specialise in cheap prints, but their pattern books are not on the whole the ones to have survived, and it is only occasionally possible to identify designs known to have been sold to the working class.

For the middle-class market, the cotton printers produced patterns, mostly on more expensive types of fabric, that were calculated to attract well-to-do customers by the refinement and quality of the designs, as well as by their novelty. A constant
Above: Printed cotton dress, English, c.1784. In the eighteenth century, printed cottons, like this dress, were restricted to middle and upper-class wear.

Right: White cotton dress, English, c.1810. The growth of a working-class market for printed cottons caused them to be abandoned by the middle and upper classes, who started to buy only fine white cottons.

*Select Committee on the Copyright of Designs, 1840, paras 948-950.

succession of new designs was produced in small quantities for middle-class women who wished to be dressed in patterns that they could be sure had not yet been reproduced on the cheaper fabrics worn by working-class women. It is hard to pin down exactly how the patterns for the middle class differed from those for the working class and whether they indicated anything about the differences that were supposed to exist between the two classes. In any case, many fashionable designs were subsequently reproduced by the manufacturers on cheap cotton, a practice which both attracted working-class customers wanting to follow the fashion, and caused the owners of dresses in the first, expensive printing of a pattern to discard them, because they had become 'common', and to buy new ones.* What evidence there is about the patterns intended exclusively for the working class suggests that these were thought to be distinguished by their vulgarity and crudity. However, this does not seem to have been a permanent characteristic, for, as one critic wrote in 1856:

'... good authorities in the Midland Counties, at least, say that the great mass of the people who usually buy these things prefer
the smaller, neater and more simply coloured designs, to the blotchy abominations which used formerly to be sought after, and which in too many instances, are still presumed by the less observant manufacturer and retailer, to constitute the taste of the working class."

Nor was the attempt to distinguish between the refinement of designs for the middle class and the coarseness of designs for the working class always successful. How a pattern was judged could depend to a large extent on who was wearing it; as another critic observed,

'... it sometimes occurs that a staring pattern, which we should be disposed to call extremely vulgar on a commonplace person, is worn with impunity by one of ultra fashionable rank. A distinguished air, and a fine person, may carry off the extravagance of a design ...'"

Thus, while the evidence leaves no doubt there was differentiation in cotton print patterns on the basis of class, identifying the class for which particular designs were intended is made difficult, if not impossible, by the nature of the market for cottons, where the manufacturers, their customers and the passage of time all conspired to obscure the distinctions as they might have existed at any one moment.

The history of another commodity, soap, shows design being used commercially to create demand in a particular class market. Unlike printed cottons, where class differentiation in design had long been accepted, soap products were not manufactured for specific classes of consumer until W.H. Lever began to market his new soap, Sunlight, by giving it a brand image with specific working class appeal. Soap for laundering clothes and for household cleaning was manufactured in Britain on a scale that grew steadily throughout the nineteenth century. By 1885, there were a number of well-established firms in the business, but none of them had yet produced soap in a form that could be said to have been designed. There were about half a dozen basic varieties of household soap made by these firms according to accepted recipes. The soap was supplied in long bars to the grocers who cut pieces
off and sold them by weight to the customers, much as if it were cheese. Until the 1880s, each soap manufacturer operated in a regional market in which he had a monopoly. There was thus little or no competition between the makers. Any stamp or brand on the soap was of no interest to the customer, who chose a kind of soap, such as ‘mottled’, ‘curd’, ‘primrose’, or ‘Windsor’, and not a make.* As one of the main soap manufacturers explained at the time:

‘. . . there is little or no difference in quality between different makes of Bar Soaps – there is a Thomas’s Primrose, a Knight’s Primrose, a Cook’s Primrose – all the same soap. It is impossible therefore by the nature of the case to . . . [attempt] through advertising to create a demand in favour of any one particular make.’*

This state of affairs changed rapidly with the arrival of W.H. Lever in the soap industry in 1885. Lever had been a partner in a wholesale grocery business with branches in Bolton and Wigan, a business that depended for its prosperity on the rising standard of living of working-class customers. In 1884, he began to tire of grocery and turned his attention to soap, on which working-class households were tending to spend more and more money. Lever aimed to capture this market, which existing manufacturers of household soaps had not yet tried to reach, with a special product. He was to become so successful in selling his own new ‘washer’ soap that other soap manufacturers went out of their way to claim that their bar soaps were not for working-class customers. One established manufacturer was to explain:

‘Bar soaps do not come into competition with “washers”. That is a special soap sold in the lower-class neighbourhoods, and we find . . . that it does not sell in the best-class neighbourhoods. They still stick to the bar soap trade in some form or another.’*

In his grocery business, Lever had sold bar soap made by other manufacturers but branded with his own name. In 1884, he realised that to increase his sales to working class customers, he had to advertise. For this, he needed a distinctive product with a distinctive name. In 1884 or 1885, he introduced the name ‘Sunlight’
Printed paper wrapping for Lifebuoy soap. As well as selling soap in tablets, Lever wrapped it in paper wrappers printed with the brand name and publicity for the product. This ensured that his brand was distinguished from all others.

for all the bar soaps he sold; among them was a soap made with a high proportion of palm oil instead of tallow, so that it had an easy-lathering quality, which allowed Lever to publicise it as 'the soap which washes itself', or 'self-washer' soap. He anticipated a future for it as a household soap for the working-class market. To distinguish it from existing types of bar soap and to draw attention to the brand, he sold it in one pound tablets, ready-wrapped in imitation parchment with his name and 'Sunlight' printed on. Although there were precedents in America, forming household soap into tablets was a new development in Britain and one which made Lever's product instantly distinguishable by both appearance and brand name from all other soaps in grocers' shops.

Because of difficulties with the makers of the 'washer' soap, Lever leased a soap works in Warrington in 1885 and began making it himself. From then on, it was the only sort of soap to be called Sunlight, a name which identified it both as a type and as a make. Lever's business quickly became a phenomenal success: annual production increased from 3,000 tons in 1886 to 18,000 tons in 1890, the year after the move to his new factory at Port Sunlight, and to around 52,000 tons in 1900.

Much of Lever's success rested on having identified a distinct working-class market and having designed and packaged a product which he then could advertise effectively, an option not open to other manufacturers because of the lack of differentiation between their products. Lever took great pains with his advertising, using clever slogans, displaying advertisements on railway stations and roadside hoardings, and taking space in newspapers. Throughout, the advertising was directed specifically at working-class custom, as Lever himself later made clear:

'In the very first handbook we issued with Sunlight Soap, which was got up by myself, entitled Sunlight Soap and How to Use It, everything was brought down to the level of the working man's needs. The only point where I went beyond this was with instructions for cleaning pampas grass, feathers and so on, but I view these as to be found in many working men's houses, the pampas grass in a jar on the Bible in the sitting room and the feathers in the hats of the daughters.'*

Lever's other advertising strategies, of which the most famous was the slogan, 'Why does a woman look older sooner than a man?' were also aimed at working-class customers. Such aggressive advertising techniques, which were deplored by other manufacturers, succeeded in making Sunlight popular with the

*Quoted in C. Wilson, pp.38-39.
Advertisements for Sunlight soap. Advertising was only possible once Lever’s product had a brand image. Advertisements like these were directed at working-class custom.

Master and Servant

It was when the classes met as masters and servants or in organisations where there were hierarchies of employees that differences in design became sufficiently consistent to give a clear idea of the distinctions that were thought to exist. Whether the people were railwaymen, bank clerks or shop assistants, the design of the clothes they wore and of the articles they used helped define their status and the nature of their relationships with one another and with their employers.

The relationship between domestic servants and their employers, though by no means the only kind of master-servant relationship that existed in the nineteenth century, was one of the most complex and awkward. By the middle of the century, it was beginning to
Railway uniforms, North Eastern Railway, 1905. The railways were very hierarchical organisations. The occupations and ranks of employees were expressed in the cut and cloth of the uniforms. From North Eastern Railway, Specifications of Uniforms, Leeds, 1905, facing pp.63, 68, 101, 108.


*For instance H. & A. Mayhew, pp. 89-90, 94.


be referred to as a ‘problem’, which suggests that the relationship was undergoing some kind of change. Hindsight suggests that the problem lay not in domestic service itself, but resulted from changes elsewhere that were making it into an archaic form of employment.* Jobs where the employee lived in the master’s house, ate his food, and was regarded as his responsibility had once been normal, but in most occupations this form of employment died out during the eighteenth century. Such customs survived in the nineteenth century only for farmworkers in some districts, and for domestic servants. On the whole, working-class men and women looked for jobs where they did not have to live in and were paid solely in money. The survival of domestic service’s anachronistic form at a time when other occupations gave more freedom and independence provoked considerable discontent among servants, who saw their friends and relatives leading a more independent, though less secure, life and envied them for it.

This discontent led in the later nineteenth century to the increasingly common complaints from employers about ‘headstrong’ and disobedient servants. Any aspirations towards independence in servants were combated by the increasing concern of masters and mistresses to make sure their servants were identified as different from themselves. Symptomatic of this was the anxiety of mistresses at being mistaken for their maids or at their maids being mistaken for themselves, both popular subjects for cartoons and humorous stories in the middle of the century.*

Although male servants had normally worn livery since the eighteenth century, female servants, who greatly outnumbered them, did not wear distinguishing costumes until the 1860s.* Parson Woodforde’s maids wore dresses made from printed cottons he bought for them, and eighteenth-century paintings show maids
Station Master's single breasted suit, summer style, in blue twill, with four mohair buttons. 'NER' in gold on both sides of collar.

Passenger Guard's double-breasted suit, winter style, in fine pilot cloth, piped with scarlet cloth, sleeves with red piping 4½ in. from bottom, gilt pressed buttons, 'NER' in gold both sides of collar.

Goods Guard's single-breasted suit, in medium pilot cloth, no piping. Horn buttons. 'Guard' in red worsted on left side of collar, 'NER' on other.

Porter's single-breasted suit in blued olive corduroy. Six small white metal buttons.

wearing clothes similar to the day-to-day clothes their mistresses would have worn at home. Since the employers provided their servants' clothes, there was no danger of maids appearing dressed in a way that might overshadow their mistresses; in any case, the relationship was sufficiently well-defined as not to be so easily threatened. However, by the mid-nineteenth century, the lowering of the price of printed cottons and the fact that printers would reprint fashionable designs upon cheap fabric made it possible for

Joseph van Aken: *An English Family at Tea*, oil painting, c.1720. Apart from her apron, the costume of the servant pouring the tea is not markedly different, except perhaps in the quality of the material, from that of the ladies seated.
Cartoon of a mistress and maid in crinolines, 1853. Servants imitating the costume of their mistress was a recurrent theme of cartoons and humorous stories in the 1850s, and indicates the anxiety that existed over this before servants' uniforms became normal. From *Punch*, vol. 24, 1853, p. 170.


Servants to dress themselves in garments that could be mistaken for the smart dresses in their mistresses' wardrobes. Faced with this prospect and with servants who were seeking greater independence, mistresses began to insist upon uniforms for their maids, particularly parlour maids, who would be seen by visitors. From the 1860s, it became normal for maids to wear black dresses, with white caps and white aprons, the distinctive garb of the domestic servant well into the twentieth century.

The inferior status of servants was emphasised by other strategies. Rules for servants' behaviour became increasingly elaborate and ritualised: for example, servants were expected never to hand an article directly to their employers or their guests except on a silver tray.* Restrictions on when servants might go out of the house and who might visit them reinforced the sense that they were their employers' property. As if the rules in themselves were not sufficient, the distinction between master and servant was made physically apparent, when large houses began to be designed in the mid-nineteenth century with entirely separate servants' quarters and independent circulation systems so that servants could carry out their work largely out of sight of their employers. Typical of the arrangements for segregating servants from their masters were those at Walton House in Surrey, remodelled by Sir Charles Barry in 1837. The servants occupied the top half of the building above the axis of the carriage porch and entrance hall, and their quarters connected with the master's end of the house only through a small door in the entrance gallery and through the passageway at the extreme left of the plan. Though Walton was a large house, much the same principle of strongly defined spatial segregation of masters and servants was to be found in smaller houses designed for the middle and upper classes in the nineteenth century.*
Such complicated architectural solutions to the problem of the relationship between master and servant were available only to the wealthy. A more economical and, in many ways, more incisive method of indicating to servants the inferiority of their status was through the development of plain and humble designs for the beds they slept in, the chairs they sat upon, and the plates they ate off. The catalogues of nineteenth century furniture manufacturers usually contained a selection of kitchen and servants' furniture which was distinguished by its plain finish, lack of ornament and cheapness. The furniture was invariably made of deal, either plain or painted, and so was quite unmistakably different from that intended for the use of the master and mistress in the other rooms of the house. Heal's catalogue for 1896 illustrated a servant's
bedroom, furnished for £4.14.9d, with a simple iron bedstead and a chest of drawers, chair and washstand in plain deal. Though a servant with a room furnished as well as this might have considered herself lucky, the plainness of the designs left no doubt as to whom they were for. Even in this room, there was no sign of luxury, no accommodation for self-indulgent comfort or relaxation. The general standard of the furnishing of most servants’ rooms was far more comfortless. They were often furnished with cast-offs and calculated to give the servant no chance to feel that there could be grounds for comparison between herself and her mistress.

The lesson that lay in the austerity of the servants’ furniture was not lost upon servants themselves. The autobiographies of domestics frequently refer to the discomfort of the furnishings they were provided with. One former housemaid, who entered service in 1922, wrote:

‘My second venture was a definite improvement, as under-housemaid of two in a private house . . . I had a room to myself here. The type of room I discovered through trial that one always expected in “gentlemen’s service” has an iron bedstead with lumpy mattress, specially manufactured for the use of maids, I suspect, a painted chest of drawers, with spotty mirror, lino-covered floor and a strip of matting at the bedside.’*

Another former servant, Margaret Powell, who entered service a year earlier, has described the rationale for the choice of such furnishings:

‘It was the opinion of “Them” upstairs that servants couldn’t appreciate good living or comfort, and therefore must have plain fare, they must have dungeons to work in and to eat in, and they must retire to cold spartan bedrooms to sleep.’*

The one space in the Victorian house which was used by both master and servant was the hall. Masters and their visitors passed through the hall, when entering and leaving the house, while servants were required to be there to receive guests and take their hats and coats. Because of their combined use by servants and masters, halls needed a special type of furniture, particularly of chair. Although people of the master’s class might pass through the hall, they were unlikely to linger or sit down; the only people

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*Powell, p.80.
likely to spend long enough in it to need to sit down were inferiors, whether servants, prospective servants waiting for interview, or, as the American author of one nineteenth-century book on the decoration of the home put it, 'messenger boys, book agents, the census man, and the bereaved lady who offers us soap.' Hall chairs would be seen by the master and his guests and thus had to conform to the standards of beauty found elsewhere in the house, but there was no reason for them to be any more comfortable than the rest of the furniture provided for servants. The same American authority on decoration explained:

'As visitors of this class are the only ones who will sit in the hall, considerations of comfort may be allowed to yield to picturesqueness, and any chair or bench that gives us that will serve . . .'*

The conventional hall chair was usually made of oak or mahogany, with an elaborately carved back and turned legs, but was distinguished from drawing-room or dining-room chairs by its plank seat and lack of upholstery; it was consistent with other

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*Cook, p. 33.

Servant's bedroom, furnished by Heal's, 1896. The plain furniture signified that it was for a servant. From Heal's catalogue, 1896.

Bedroom, furnished by Heal's, 1896. The contrast between this room, for the mistress, and the servant's room reinforced the social distance between the mistress and maid. From Heal's catalogue, 1896.
Hall chairs, c.1850. To be seen by all, but sat upon only by social inferiors, the hall chair characteristically had ornate back and legs, but a plank seat. From William Smee & Sons, Designs of Furniture, a stock of which is always kept ready for sale at their cabinet and upholstery manufactury and workrooms, no. 6 Finsbury pavement, London, c.1850, p. 357.


The distinctions in furniture were also expressed in tableware. In catalogues like those of the Army and Navy Stores in the 1890s and 1900s, the servants’ ware was plain and unornamented, or decorated only with the most ubiquitous design of all, the willow pattern, and it contrasted sharply with the elegant and highly decorated china which was featured on other pages and would be seen standing on the shelves of the kitchen dresser while the servants ate off the plainest of crockery.

If such distinctions in design were intended to convince domestic servants of their own lowly status, it also helped employers believe that servants were as inferior as their occupation and accoutrements seemed to make them. Servants often complained that employers were oblivious of the conditions under which they worked and of the tasks they were expected to do: when they dared to point out the unreasonableness or impossibility of what was required of them, mistresses often appeared genuinely surprised and shocked by what was being expected of them. Had servants worn clothes like other people and lived in accommodation more like that of other members of the household and less like that of a penal establishment, the temptation to assume that they were not only poorer but mentally inferior and less civilized than their employers would not have been so strong. At a time when liberal thought was beginning to doubt the ‘natural’ inferiority of servants, the stigmatizing of servants by the clothes they wore and the articles they used was convincing proof of the wrongheadedness of the new ideas for those who were unsympathetic to them.
While the desire to embody social distinctions may have accounted for, say, the classification of pocket knives into ladies' and men's patterns, it does not explain why ladies should have required a choice of seventeen different designs, nor men a choice of 39 designs. How are we to explain the compulsion which gripped so many manufacturers to be so prolific with designs for their products?

One possible answer is that variety gave customers a degree of choice and enabled them to feel more sure of their own individuality. A masculine-looking pocket knife might underline the purchaser's view of himself as manly, but as long as it was the only men's knife available, it would do nothing to make him feel different from other men. What would do this would be the opportunity to choose from a range of knives or to have a particular design which he alone among his acquaintances might possess. Variety for such reasons occurred to the greatest degree in goods which were conspicuous to others, such as furniture and clothes, or in printed cottons, an industry where manufacturers were very conscious of trading on desires for individuality.

The belief that unusual or unique possessions bestow individuality upon their owners is an illusion that has been indulged in for a long time. This aspect of commodity fetishism was presumably derived from the aristocratic practice of collecting relics, curiosities and unique works of art, but how manufactured goods, by their nature never unique, ever came to be regarded in the same light is mysterious. Whatever the cause, capitalist manufacture was quick to take advantage of it, and produce ten, twenty or a hundred designs where one would have sufficed.

A second reason for the variety of designs was the manufacturers' anticipation of increasing their sales. Subtle variations in what was essentially the same product might persuade people to buy a second or third article where one would have been enough for their needs. Cake stands, shaving mugs and nursery ware fulfilled functions that could have been served equally well by standard china products, but they provided customers with a rationale for buying additional articles. Similar reasons explain why W.H. Lever, having established the success of Sunlight soap, began to market what was essentially the same soap in a number of slightly different forms. In 1894, Lever introduced Lifebuoy soap, which was Sunlight soap with the addition of phenol (carbolic acid) to give it hygienic properties, and in 1899, he introduced two more varieties, Monkey Brand which contained a scouring agent, and Sunlight in flake form, subsequently known as Lux.* Lever had recognised that there was a physical limit to any household's demand for soap, and that the only way to increase sales was to offer new variants for specialised uses, which consumers could be persuaded to buy in addition to the original brand. The principle of diversifying the product in order to increase sales, which has been followed ever since in soap manufacture, was at work in a great many nineteenth-century industries.

A third possible reason for variety was that manufacturers and their designers may initially have been uncertain of the appropriate imagery to represent the qualities attributed to each social group. Manufacturers stood a greater chance of finding, say, a hairbrush that exactly fitted assumptions about masculinity if they started by offering a large number of designs rather than a few or only one. It was the decision as to which designs would represent people's

*C. Wilson, pp.55-57.
notions of the elusive qualities of social class that proved the most
difficult, and it was therefore not surprising that the greatest
proliferation and fastest change was to be found in this category of
consumer goods.

To most manufacturers of consumer goods in the nineteenth
century, the commercial advantages of producing a great many
different designs far outweighed the disadvantages in cost. How­
ever, the relative profitability of producing one or many designs
depended somewhat upon the method of production employed.
Handicraft industries lent themselves more easily than mechanised
industries to the production of many different designs. Where the
forming of each component and the final assembly was the work
of a craftsman, it made little difference whether he worked to one
design or another, but in more highly mechanised industries, the
preparation of new dies, templates, jigs and moulds entailed great
expense and was a disincentive to variety.

The effects of the change from entirely handicraft to more
mechanised methods of manufacture upon the range of designs
can be seen in the output of the Windsor chair manufacturers of
High Wycombe. From early in the nineteenth century, each
component of the chair, its seat, legs and balusters, was made by
an independent craftsman, who sold his work to a chair master.
The masters employed framers to assemble the chairs, and under­
took the distribution and sale of the chairs. All the processes of
production, from sawing up the logs to the framing, were carried
out by hand labour; one of the processes, the turning of the legs
and stretchers, was the work of craftsmen known as 'bodgers',
who worked in huts in the woods around High Wycombe, turning
the legs on primitive treadle lathes from timber that they them­
selves had felled. The number of designs of Windsor chair available
was very great, as the surviving catalogues show. Many of the
masters would buy a standard, locally printed catalogue with
three to four hundred designs in it and would have their own
name overprinted on it, with an indication of which designs they
manufactured. The larger firms generally offered well over a hun­
dred designs, and one master, Edwin Skull, who had a specially
printed broadsheet, advertised 141. As long as the masters relied
on hand labour, there was almost no economic limit to the variety
of designs they could offer, for they had only to instruct the
craftsmen to produce a different design to obtain it.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the masters gradu­
ally began to introduce machines into their workshops,
principally as a means of employing labour that was less skilled
and therefore cheaper. Machines were developed that shaped the
seats to a preset pattern, work formerly done by a man using a
curved adze. Other machines were introduced to bore holes at
preset angles in the seat for the legs and uprights, a task previously
done with a brace and bit by the framer, whose skill had lain in
his ability to judge by eye the different angle needed for each
hole. Increasingly, during the twentieth century, the masters
began to employ machinery for every process: balusters were cut
to jigs, and finally even the low-paid work of the bodgers was
replaced by electric lathes in the factories, though several bodgers
survived until 1939. With the use of so many machines, a major
cost of production became the preparation of jigs to sufficiently
high standards of accuracy to ensure that all the components of
Chair bodgers shaping legs by hand, near High Wycombe, c.1920. Until the arrival of machinery, the components of the chairs were made by men working in the open, using the simplest of tools.

*This discussion of the High Wycombe chair industry is based on L. J. Mayes, The History of Chairmaking in High Wycombe, London, 1960, especially pp.32-34 and pp.61-68.

The chair would fit together. Because of the expense of making the jigs and setting up the machine tools, it ceased to be economic to vary the designs to any great extent, and as a result the number produced by each manufacturer fell in the inter-war years. By 1980, the largest firm making Windsor chairs, Furniture Industries Ltd (whose products are known by the brand name Ercol), produced only seventeen designs, compared with the 141 offered by Edwin Skull a century earlier.*

Edwin Skull & Co. broadsheet, c.1860. Such a large range of designs was usual among High Wycombe chair manufacturers in the nineteenth century.
Chair framer boring holes in the seat, High Wycombe. The skill in this job was in judging the angles correctly.

*Select Committee on the Copyright of Designs, 1840, para.2851.

During the nineteenth century it was not only handicraft production that manufactured variety; so, too, did many mechanised industries. Many cotton print masters who gave evidence to the 1840 Select Committee on design stressed the great number of patterns they produced every year. One printer, who annually introduced between four and five hundred new designs, said 'we endeavour to make a trade by variety rather than by excellence'. They were most explicit about their reasons for this policy - as the same printer explained:

'I should expect that the more I sowed, the more I should reap; that the more pains I took in producing new and good things, the more likely I should be to be rewarded by the public for my labour and expense.'*

Another manufacturer, who said he printed around four hundred new designs each year, commented, 'I think I should get more money by continually reproducing styles, as frequently as possible.'*

To these manufacturers, variety of design was a principle of business and the key to profit, for it was the means by which they persuaded their middle-class customers to purchase textiles in excess of their needs. By constantly producing new designs, manufacturers were able to promote fashion; a lady who saw that the material of which her dress was made had become widespread and popular would purchase a new and original design to keep ahead in fashion, even though the first dress might be barely worn. As the same manufacturer who thought that the more he sowed the more he would reap replied when he was asked if he thought more patterns would lead to more dresses being worn:

'I think it is exceedingly probable, because what is a dress after all? It is mere fancy and taste, it is not a mere covering, otherwise we should not have had any printed dresses at all. It is like paintings, there is no reason why a gentleman should possess a painting, but when he sees a good one, he wishes to have it.'*

*Select Committee on the Copyright of Designs, 1840, para.2883.

*Select Committee on the Copyright of Designs, 1840, para.3755.

*Select Committee on the Copyright of Designs, 1840, para.2885.
Seat boring machine, High Wycombe. This machine, introduced in the late nineteenth century, made the chair framer's skill redundant, and, like other machines, discouraged manufacturers from proliferating designs.

Theories of Diversity

The principle of 'the more I sow, the more I shall reap' belonged in some measure to all manufacturers of consumer goods, whether chairs, cutlery or clocks. Profit was determined by the volume of sale, and, since more designs stimulated fashion, they promised more sales and played an important part in the accumulation of capital.

The activity of design was therefore of great assistance to the development of capitalism in industries making consumer goods, supplying the variety that enabled manufacturers constantly to be increasing their sales and their profits. If design was of such great service to capitalism, capitalism has been no less good for design. Not only did it bring design into existence as a necessary activity within the division of labour in manufacturing, but its appetite for novelty and variety guaranteed the prosperity of designers. Capitalism may have been very bad for many crafts and trades, eroding their skills, their status and their rewards, but design is one activity that capitalism has caused to flourish.

The tendency for manufacturers to multiply the designs of their products has not gone unnoticed by writers on design. The majority of books on the history of design and the decorative arts are filled with lists of designs produced by one manufacturer or a set of manufacturers. Few historians, however, have made the attempt to explain the reasons for the differences between these many designs. The presence of diversity has usually been taken for granted as normal and therefore, to the mind trained to find interest only in irregularities and curiosities, unworthy of comment.

When historians have tried to explain the diversification of designs, they have invariably fallen back on one of two theories. Some have seen the development of new and different designs as the result of the evolution of new needs; for example, the development of new and different designs of spanners - ring spanners, cranked spanners, and socket wrenches - would be explained by the need for tools to assemble and dismantle machinery whose designs had become increasingly complicated and compact. Other historians have attributed the development of new and different designs to the desire of designers to express their ingenuity and artistic talent. Both theories may indeed explain the diversity of designs in particular instances, but they fail to cover all cases.

A good example of the all-too-common failure to make sense of the diversification of designs occurs in Siegfried Giedion's Mechanization Takes Command, the only previous attempt to relate design to the history of society in a comprehensive way. Giedion observed the development in mid-nineteenth century America of many designs for the adjustable chair, a novel type of furniture. He tried to explain the introduction of the new type, and the great variety of designs for it, by means of both the standard theories for diversity. He began by arguing that the nineteenth century adopted a new, more relaxed, semi-reclining posture of sitting, in which people sought comfort by constantly shifting their bodies:

'The posture of the nineteenth century... is based on relaxation. This relaxation is found in a free, unposed attitude that can be called neither sitting nor lying. Once again the painters are the first to voice the unconscious inclinations of their time by surprising and capturing their model in this indefinite posture. In a
Giedion saw the development of patent furniture as a response to this new posture of sitting; he wrote of new furniture, its 'aim is to serve needs previously without claim or without solution.' This explanation was quite consistent with Giedion's position as a supporter and publicist of the early twentieth-century Modern Movement in architecture and design, one of the precepts of which was that 'form follows function'. However, Giedion's attachment to functionalism and his determination to believe that all designs, or at least all the designs that he admired, must be derived from the discovery of new uses led him into some distinctly rickety arguments. Applied to adjustable chairs, the 'functionalist' theory of design development seems doubtful, for it is most unlikely that after several millennia mankind should suddenly have discovered a new way of sitting in the nineteenth century. The inadequacies
of the 'functionalist' theory become even more apparent when applied to other products. Could Montgomery Ward's 131 different designs of pocket knife be said to be the result of the discovery of new ways of cutting?

Giedion's second reason for the proliferation of the designs of adjustable chairs was a supposed surge of creative ingenuity amongst designers: 'when creative power comes to life, objects that centuries of use have left unchanged - plows, hammers, saws or furniture - take on a new aspect.'* This explanation seems even more suspect. The many different designs may reveal great ingenuity on the part of designers, but this is hardly a cause of the proliferation of adjustable chair designs. Why should the rapid multiplication of designs not have occurred at some other time in history? There seems no reason to believe that nineteenth-century designers were more inventive and ingenious than people at other times.

However, the greatest weakness of the 'ingenious designer' theory is that it betrays a misunderstanding of the process of design and manufacture, for it attributes to designers a power and autonomy that they do not in practice possess. Designers, unless they also held managerial positions in manufacturing industry would have had no influence on how many or what type of articles should be made, other than to determine their form. The decision to increase the number of designs must, like any other decision about production, rest with the manufacturer. The reason for producing many different designs was that it was profitable for the manufacturer to do so.

The arguments which have been advanced in this chapter, unlike the 'functionalist' or 'ingenious designer' theories of diversity, place the products of design in a direct relationship to the ideas of the society in which they are made. The evidence is that manufacturers themselves made distinctions between designs on the basis of different markets: in some cases, as with printed textiles, the manufacturers explicitly acknowledged that they made distinctions of this kind in their production of patterns; in other cases, the classifications in manufacturers' catalogues provide silent testimony of the fact that their various designs were intended for different groups of people.

To look at the ranges of goods illustrated in the catalogues of nineteenth century manufacturers, department stores and mail order houses is to look at a representation of society. Through the designs of knives, watches, clothes and furniture to suit every rank and station in life, one can read the shape of society as manufacturers saw it, and as their customers learned to see it. For, like any representation, be it in the form of painting, literature or film, this strange and cumbersome masterpiece created by manufacturing industry not only corresponded to what was seen to exist, but, without recourse to language, metaphor or symbolism, also showed people social boundaries and distinctions that might otherwise have been invisible to them, or to which they might have been indifferent. Yet, unlike the audience for works of art, which is generally only a minority, that for manufactured artefacts in the nineteenth century was enormous: even though people might have possessed only a few of them, or even none, the range of designs would have been familiar to them. And to know the range of different designs was to know an image of society.