CHAPTER 4

CONSUMING ASPIRATIONS: BRIC-A-BRAC AND THE POLITICS OF VICTORIAN MATERIALISM IN WEST OAKLAND

PAUL R. MULLINS

INTRODUCTION

In 1881 Oakland’s Health Officer E.H. Woolsey complained to the city council that “many populated streets are not provided with sewers,” emphasizing that the “ventilation of our street sewers is an urgent requirement, for at present the principal escape of the fetid and noxious gases is through the ordinary house-traps, into sleeping rooms” (1881:71). These conditions were not significantly better in July 1894, when the subsequent city Health Officer reported that “the sewers had not been flushed since January, resulting in their bad condition at present” (Oakland Enquirer 1894b).

The sewer system’s January 1894 flushing did not come soon enough for the residents at 737-½ Myrtle Street. On 13 January Oakland’s Health Officer was compelled to evict the residents because the home was considered “unfit for human habitation by reason of defective plumbing and drainage” (Oakland Enquirer 1894a). When the residents at 737-½ Myrtle Street were expelled, their West Oakland neighbors included Harry Pierson Chapman, an Illinois-born paperhanger who lived at 828 Myrtle Street between 1892 and 1896 (Privy 3300/Pit 3301). Like any resident of the area, Chapman certainly would have been hard-pressed to overlook the unsanitary state of the community. Indeed, the Chapman’s own backyard contained an open depression that attracted rats that gnawed much of the pit’s exposed food remains; remains of at least five rats, a cat, and a kitten were recovered from the pit’s archaeological assemblage. Yet, in contrast to the community’s sanitary disorder and the household’s less-than-antiseptic yard, the Chapman home was populated by a rich array of decorative material culture ranging from Asian ceramics, to glass vases, to a pair of porcelain figurines. Two of these objects at least symbolically recast those objective conditions through the most mundane Victorian decorative goods. The 2-½-inch tall porcelain figurines depict two characters seated on chamber pots, a curious motif with relatively bewildering meaning (Figure 4.1). They are only two inexpensive and symbolically enigmatic items in an assemblage of nearly 1,500 objects, so it is tempting to simply ignore them as quaint but inconsequential whimsies. Yet with a modest rethinking of material symbolism, we can begin to see these objects as penetrating, albeit oblique, observations on turn-of-the-century society.

Like most late-19th century bric-a-brac, these curious chamber-pot figures were not mirrors of the real world as much as they were distorted symbols of what their possessors wished it to be. In the midst of West Oakland’s poor drainage, sewer, and plumbing conditions, the Chapman figurines served as a concrete symbol that distanced the household from the consequences of
poor sanitary conditions. Dressed in a gilded skirt and bonnet and wearing a trace of red lip coloring, the female figure provides a curiously dignified demeanor to one of the most basic of human experiences. Alongside her now-decapitated partner, the pair made it possible to comment on an activity few people share with each other, let alone display in their front room. Yet the childlike figures project an innocent humor onto the realities of a universal albeit unexpressed experience—and the broader dilemmas of public sanitation—in one of many communities aspiring to improve public sewer conditions. In the 1890s, proper Victorians and aspiring gentility were abandoning chamber pots for a range of new sanitary technologies, so the figures illustrated significant Victorian transformations by overemphasizing their consumers’ distance from “uncouth” historical practices. These figurines had no impact on objective sanitary conditions in West Oakland, but they did furtively reflect and shape how the household perceived and expressed those conditions.

**Archaeological Approaches to Bric-a-Brac**

Examining just these two trinkets emphasizes how bric-a-brac complicates standard archaeological analyses that fixate on function, cost, quantity, and self-evident symbolism. Most archaeological analysis is based on artifact function, which traditionally is defined as the utilitarian union of physical form and task (e.g., a projectile point is manufactured for hunting, a hammer is made for driving nails). The Chapman figurines’ function can be termed ornamentation or decorative furnishing, but the notions of ornamentation and decoration are quite ambiguous and do not provide a concrete sense of the meaning these figurines assumed in the Chapman household. The suggestion that these things should be ignored because they are found so infrequently is imprudent, because the paucity of archaeological bric-a-brac likely reflects distinctive curation processes. For instance, one Greek-American born in West Oakland in 1915 noted that she and her siblings rarely entered their front room: “That was like a museum. My mother’s house is a museum” (Karnegis 1996:11). Victorian parlors were generally stocked with a household’s showpiece furnishings and reserved for “public” entertaining and social ceremony, so the specialized care for decorative parlor objects should be reflected in low breakage rates (compare similar patterns in Mullins 1999:163).

While historical archaeologists devote considerable attention to artifact value, an analysis focused on cost and the assumed social cachet of pricey objects does not provide much insight into bric-a-brac symbolism. In most cases, bric-a-brac was quite inexpensive, yet it had sufficient social consequence to populate the homes of elite and working classes alike.
Decorative-arts scholars interpret household material culture such as bric-a-brac by assessing its aesthetic style; such an analysis would identify distinct motifs and relate them to broader stylistic patterns, design movements (e.g., Beaux-Arts, Colonial Revival), and dominant decorative counsel. This provides some useful insight, but it underestimates how clearly defined aesthetic design movements were themselves reinterpreted by bric-a-brac producers and consumers; that is, any given home might have objects that borrowed from many different decorative movements, and single mass-produced objects often incorporated elements from multiple styles. Focusing on style and dominant counsel also suggests that stylistic mavens, producers, and moral ideologues—rather than consumers—determined the meaning of objects.

The challenge in interpreting Victorian bric-a-brac lies in defining the range of possible meanings in objects and then building a persuasive case to argue why certain consumers favored particular meanings from that range of possibilities. What specific examples of bric-a-brac meant is difficult to fathom without knowing about the consumers themselves. This is not utterly unlike symbolism in any material object: the meaning of any object is a complex, situationally distinct amalgam of producer-imposed symbolism as well as specific consumers’ sentiments. Those sentiments are shaped by personal and group identity, including class, ethnicity, gender, and any other dimension of identity. Consequently, bric-a-brac interpretation demands an appreciation of the consumer who invested an object with meaning, not simply an understanding of function, aesthetic motifs, artifact quantity, or cost.

Bric-a-brac is a somewhat ambiguous term that refers to a range of primarily decorative objects common in American homes from about 1850 into the 1930s. Ornamental objects such as figurines, vases, statuary, and chromolithographs were produced in staggering quantities in the late 19th century; their use was discussed extensively in household literature, and they could be purchased in virtually any American market for relatively modest expense. The definition of decoration and its distinction from function are admittedly unclear, since most material objects have functional utility and decorative symbolism that are difficult to separate. Most Victorian parlor furniture, for instance, had genuine utility, but genteel consumers also valued furnishings for their inferred capacity to fabricate and exhibit a genteel social identity. Some goods like flowerpots and bird feeders certainly had strictly defined utilitarian purposes (i.e., to hold plants and bird feed), but potted plants and songbirds were themselves ornamental, much like ceramic figurines. Rather than cast a narrow definition of bric-a-brac, this chapter approaches bric-a-brac as a broad range of household goods produced expressly or primarily for ornamentation and accepts that most Victorians did not make a particularly clear distinction between function and ornamentation.

The stunning quantity of household material culture recovered during the Cypress Archaeology Project excavations provides a rare opportunity to study decorative objects discarded by a diverse range of late-Victorian urban consumers. The material culture of West Oakland’s Irish, African Americans, Chinese, U.S.-born whites, and a broad swath of European immigrants provides a unique opportunity to examine how various middle- and working-class groups negotiated, reproduced, and/or ignored Victorian ideologies. In a nation increasingly defined by material consumption, the apparently mundane purchase of household material goods was a small yet meaningful way Americans positioned themselves both against and within class, racial, nationalist, regional, and materialist ideologies. Despite its apparent triviality a century later, Victorians regarded decorative material culture as a disciplinary mechanism that taught morality, fostered high culture, and confirmed American affluence. Yet these objects were themselves so symbolically enigmatic, and the discourses surrounding bric-a-brac so hotly
contested from the 1850s to 1930s, that the same object could accommodate a relatively wide range of meanings. Consequently, a single piece of bric-a-brac potentially could be an assimilative mechanism, an empowering symbol of resistance, a potent criticism of social inequality, or—more likely—all these things at the same time (Mullins 1999).

Chapter Overview

A sensitive understanding of how various consumers perceived their identities and positions within American society compels us to look systematically and creatively at household minutia such as that in West Oakland. This chapter begins by introducing the idea that seemingly innocuous objects can be seen as “politicized.” Objects’ symbolism is more complex than function or cost disclose, and their meaning is not imposed by elite or other dominant groups; instead, bric-a-brac’s meaning was contested, and this conflict harbors distinctive insight into consumer identities, social tensions, and systemic influences.

The second section examines the “morals” of household material culture. Commodities ranging from furniture to bric-a-brac were routinely consumed with the express intent of forging some morality that could focus on religion, high culture, class identity, patriarchy, nationalism, and any other number of facets of consumer identity.

The third section examines household decorative meaning and the ambiguous symbolism of bric-a-brac. Decorative-arts scholars and some archaeologists have championed a powerful attachment to material analysis that focuses on how objects fit within stylistic genres, but mass-produced minutia is difficult to pigeonhole within aesthetic categories. Schools of decorative art (e.g., Colonial Revival, Arts and Craft Movement) viewed object symbolism within well-defined philosophies, but mass production borrowed liberally from stylistic trends and looked to public space for its complex and oft-indistinct symbolism: Nationalism, classical history, imperialism, nature, faith, race, and gender were among the many highly charged social issues that found material form in decorative goods. The decorative fare produced by factories often did not have any concrete philosophical foundation: manufacturers simply reproduced popular symbols and left consumers with the most significant work of “making sense” of those symbols.

The fourth section probes the relationship between desire and bric-a-brac and assesses the rights and possibilities many Americans envisioned in commodities. The widespread conviction in American affluence is clearly reflected in the archetypal Victorian interior stocked with an eclectic clutter of exotic goods. This section examines how such decorative codes were reproduced and modified in a series of West Oakland households. The following section examines how consumers were provided models for household materialism in public spaces like department stores and Pullman railroad cars. Several West Oakland households were homes to Pullman porters, so the section probes how these families reproduced—as well as resisted—such ideological models. The chapter concludes by assessing how the West Oakland households negotiated the prominent thread of religiosity and domestic ideology projected onto household goods.
BRIC-A-BRAC’S SYMBOLIC “POLITICS”

The contestation of Victorian material meanings illuminates objects’ subtle but significant politicized symbolism. “Politics” is traditionally viewed as a set of articulate societal or group goals that are strategically pursued over time, such as in the conventional form of partisan political factions or the political-economic sense of a conscious emancipatory politics (Lunt and Livingstone 1992:169). There is little evidence, though, that disparate consumers consciously set out to transform American society by shopping for bric-a-brac or any other commodities. Nevertheless, bric-a-brac and other apparently innocuous material objects were invested with symbolic significance that obliquely commented on broader social context, expressed consumers’ individual and societal aspirations, reproduced various structural ideologies, and even criticized social inequality. Overwrought observers sometimes reduce the modern West to an Orwellian column of shoppers for whom meaningless material style has replaced substantial values, cultural identities, or collective politics (e.g., Ewen 1988; Packard 1957). In various times, Coney Island, the Montgomery Ward catalog, Disney World, or Toys“R”Us have indeed had a dimension of pure escapist detachment from objective inequalities. Yet it is shortsighted to imply that in the last century or so the masses simply have eschewed collective interests in favor of a trip to the mall. The meaning of even the most innocuous object reflects the tensions between producers and consumers, elite and disenfranchised, and many other contradictory social relationships. On the other hand, it probably is going too far to suggest that consumption has provided a concrete alternative to the existing polity; that is, despite the powerful, shared values reflected in widespread consumption, there is not a “consumer state” in which our collective social interests and values are derived from consumption. The postmodern suggestion that consumption is how people basically fabricate their own identities is even more problematic: if consumer goods did indeed provide the means to become whatever we wished, it is unclear why most of us chose these particular social circumstances.

Any object whose meaning is disputed has some “ politicized” symbolism, so it is critical to probe the political consequence of various consumption patterns and illuminate the social conditions that consumers negotiated with particular sorts of things. Like all material culture, bric-a-brac from West Oakland shaped, reflected, accentuated, and raised its consumers’ social consciousness in various recognized and unexpressed forms, providing a circuitous yet utterly politicized commentary on American society. This vision of material politicization assumes that household consumption is worth studying because its constant negotiation of conflicting personal, collective, institutional, and state interests has a broad social influence that often went unrecognized by individual consumers.

THE MORALS OF BRIC-A-BRAC CONSUMPTION

MORALS AND MATERIALISM IN THE PARLOR

From about 1850 to the eve of the First World War, the primary battleground over consumer morals was the “parlor” (Grier 1988:64). The parlor was a public household space designated for more-or-less orchestrated social activities ranging from visits to club meetings. Some antebellum and even colonial homes had similar spaces, but prior to the mid-19th century, few Americans stocked one room with expensive furnishings and then dedicated it to relatively
superfluous activity, so such formal spaces were uncommon. Unlike their predecessors, Victorian ideologues were almost uniformly dedicated to the notion that a showpiece social space was essential to genteel identity.

Ideologically the parlor was a material manifestation of a household’s values, and this thinking was extended to the rest of the home. In this sense, the parlor is likely most important as an intellectual concept that stressed the implication of household material culture on values; a household was not compelled to have a dedicated space or universally subscribe to dominant parlor-decorating codes to be influenced by parlor-making ideologies. Indeed, most communities included diverse architectural forms that varied in their intent or capacity to accommodate a space expressly planned as a public room. West Oakland, for instance, was dominated by two basic types of modest wood frame homes that Paul Groth and Marta Gutman refer to as “Informal workers’ cottages” and “Almost-polite houses” (1997:33). The workers’ cottages were constantly modified vernacular creations that paid little attention to dominant design codes and instead answered their residents’ specific utilitarian and spatial needs. These homes had no parlor room per se, but of course a room could be devoted to social activity. It was unlikely, however, that formal socializing was any room's sole function; most of these structures originally had only three rooms with little spatial specialization, and even with additions the homes remained cramped (Groth and Gutman 1997:44-49). The Almost-polite houses, in contrast, paid more attention to fixed styles and household spatial, decorative, and sanitary ideologies. Such homes borrowed from dominant Victorian codes for spatial specialization and first appeared in West Oakland in the 1870s (Groth and Gutman 1997:53). These five- or six-room homes ideally included a formal parlor space, though it sometimes served as a joint family room and parlor or even as a makeshift sleeping space.

THE AMBIGUITY OF BRIC-A-BRAC

Victorian household values were registered by material objects with varying degrees of symbolic clarity: for example, Bibles clearly evoked religious morals of some sort, but mass-produced bric-a-brac usually had considerably less clear associations. Consumers’ attraction to bric-a-brac—and many ideologues’ apprehension of the same trinkets—revolved around this ambiguous and evocative symbolism. The standard view of material symbolism is that an object represents some circumscribed meaning that is self-evident in a more-or-less shared social context. A Bible in a Victorian parlor represented religious values, even though there is some flexibility in the precise meaning of “religious values.” Bric-a-brac, though, usually was not intended to represent anything socially or historically specific. Instead, these objects evoked ambiguous sentiments about many significant yet far-ranging and ill-defined social practices.

This notion of symbolism is somewhat at odds with the standard premise that goods are consumed because they publicly display social identity or standing. Thorstein Veblen’s (1899) classic formulation of conspicuous materialism posited that things were consumed by a “leisure class” to publicly address society and display social identity, so a good’s “use value” rested on its capacity to display social prestige or some clearly defined social identity. Obviously bric-a-brac was meant to be literally displayed, but it is critical to avoid the assumption that such goods were consumed so that such display would instrumentally “communicate” some distinct meaning about the consumer to others. In the case of the aristocratic figurine pictured in “Inchoate Sentiments” (see sidebar), for instance, precisely what was the clearly defined symbolism its
Bric-a-brac extended the flexible symbolism of all material culture to its extremes. Knickknacks did this by featuring ambiguous motifs that were intended to be evocative, rather than straightforward representations. A typical example of this sort of evocative symbolic ambiguity is a figurine recovered at 830 Linden Street. This 2-3/4-inch unpainted porcelain figurine depicts a stoic, mustached male who is wearing a cap and flowing outer garment with a powder horn draped over his shoulder. The outergarment is suggestive of a doublet and overtunic, apparel that was common in Europe from the 14th to 16th centuries, and the cap is loosely reminiscent of a Renaissance-era Tudor cap. Yet the social symbolism of the figurine remains elusive because these design elements are at best only suggestive and idealized Renaissance renderings. A considerable volume of mass-produced bric-a-brac depicts historical motifs such as this that loosely refer to an idealized activity or romanticized period, rather than a concrete individual or event. Many figures like this one do not really represent any precise historical period: The figurine’s garb, for instance, is sufficiently vague that he might well represent any moment from the medieval period to 18th century. The actual activity the figure represents is itself unclear, although the powder horn and finery intimates that he is an aristocratic hunter. His well-groomed mustache and obviously Western clothing imply that he is European, but beyond this relatively nebulous identity his specific ethnic and cultural reference—if there actually was one at all—is unintelligible.

Trying to simply “make sense” of such objects in the terms of actual historical referents, dominant styles, depicted activities, or original cost is problematic, because these trinkets usually were not intended to represent anything concrete. Certainly a Victorian consumer or contemporary archaeologist might articulately interpret the aristocratic Linden Street figure as, for instance, an evocation of European elite heritage, a celebration of now-lost male sport, or a display of consumer “taste.” Yet the basic attraction of such objects is that they did not necessarily represent any specific or clearly defined association; indeed, they could simply evoke pleasant yet inchoate sentiments about a romanticized past, Western cultural and racial roots, masculinity, aristocratic behavior, or any other number of things.

This porcelain figurine reflects the symbolic ambiguity typical of mass-produced bric-a-brac. Historical-themed figures such as this commonly featured elements like the cap, powder horn, and outer garment that did not clearly represent any specific moment, and the actual activity to which the figure refers is itself unclear. This figurine was recovered from an early 1880s home at 830 Linden Street (Privy 4281).

Possessor expected visitors to grasp? Rather than assume its meaning to be public, self-evident, and defined by dominant stylistic mavens and viewers—which is how Veblen and many historical archaeologists tend to see goods, its symbolism was equally “private,” abstract, and shaped by its consumer. Many consumers certainly did wish to impart their “style,” “morality,” or “status,” but these terms were such malleable abstractions that they could entail quite different things to different people. Symbolically ambiguous objects allowed their parlor-making consumers to daydream about their own identities and society, not simply to showcase who they were (or wished to be) to others. Many mass-produced goods were consumed for such “private” household symbolism as much as for their ability to project some identity to outsiders.
Bric-a-brac sometimes featured quite familiar historical motifs (e.g., Robinson and Leadbeater ca. 1885), yet even these seemingly familiar faces and personages had somewhat ambiguous meanings. Perhaps the most popular of these historical figures, Abraham Lincoln, was represented by a Linden Street artifact that reflects the complex and dynamic historicizing that went on in America following the Civil War. Abraham Lincoln was among the most common characters reproduced in bric-a-brac ranging from chromolithographs to statuary to molds of his hands or death mask (e.g., Castelvecchi 1885:6). Much like the intensively memorialized George Washington, Lincoln symbolized a vast range of America’s most cherished values, but Lincoln had particular pertinence in the late-19th century wake of the Civil War and Emancipation. Chromolithographs of Lincoln depicted him in a range of quite charged roles as the Great Emancipator, the healer of the national rift, and an archetype of the self-made man. A vast volume of public Lincoln statuary was erected in the immediate aftermath of the war, yet these public, permanent, and monumental commemorations painted a somewhat more guarded civic picture of the President than the flood of Lincoln chromos. Kirk Savage’s (1997:65) study of public statuary in 19th-century America recognizes that statues’ intended permanence made them poor mediums to represent a given moment’s most passionately contested subjects; instead, statues were intended to pose an eternal symbolic resolution and cast a subject in a timeless pose. Nevertheless, much like bric-a-brac, statues’ aesthetics were designed to impart somewhat ethereal personality attributes like strength, wisdom, and achievement through aesthetic devices such as gesture, expression, adornments, and physical pose (Savage 1997:66). In the 1870s, for example, most public statues of Lincoln smoothed out his gaunt frame; they typically gave him more heroic garb than that he wore in his lifetime; and sometimes they placed him standing over a once-enslaved and now-deferent African American being freed by the Great Emancipator. Savage (1997:65) notes that in these guises Lincoln was the public symbol of Emancipation in the 1860s and 1870s, when most public statuary representing Emancipation’s still-unfolding history depicted African Americans alongside Lincoln in subservient poses. Often Lincoln would be posed with props such as the Emancipation Proclamation or a pen, devices that alluded to his role in Emancipation and reflected how commemorators immediately after his assassination saw Lincoln’s legacy firmly linked to Emancipation. This aesthetic underscored the wisdom of the great President and some Americans’ optimism about the end of slavery, though it said little or nothing about African Americans’ humanity or their own struggle for liberation. Yet when Reconstruction collapsed in the 1870s, Americans set to reestablishing conventional black-white racial relations and swiftly dispensed with the optimism that freedom augured an anti-racist society. This transformation in social and racial mood had an impact on subsequent Lincoln statuary, which dispensed with the figures of African Americans and aesthetic devices like scrolls; instead, Lincoln standing alone and unadorned became a symbol representing the Union’s preservation, a wise moral compass that guided the nation through its greatest menace (Savage 1997:122-124). His role in Emancipation quite quickly became subsumed to other features of his biography that conformed more readily to Americans’ prevailing mood.

A Linden Street figurine reflects this fresh post-Reconstruction vision of Lincoln. In the mid-1880s, Irish-born railroad collector Patrick Barry, his wife, Ellen, and a daughter lived at 818 Linden Street in a flat adjoining their tenants. The two households apparently shared a privy that was filled in about 1887 and included a black-glazed redware figurine of Lincoln broken just above the knees (Figure 4.2). The figurine’s circular base contains a rectangular placard that reads “LINCOLN,” and the figure’s feet are slightly askew and knees bent in a conventional statuette pose intended to evoke dynamism in a forever-immobile object. The lost portions of the figurine may have had any number of gestures, poses, or accessories, but the
modest remaining portion of the figure says a surprising amount about its symbolism. The space around Lincoln’s feet is simply molded ground; this Lincoln was not surrounded by a freed slave, suggesting that the figurine reflects shifts in post-Reconstruction Lincoln symbolism. The figurine also does not contain remnants of flowing cloaks or classical clothing, elements that post-war sculptors often added to Lincoln to render his haggard frame and inelegant attire “heroic” in the terms of 1860s-1870s aesthetic conventions (Savage 1997:69). The Linden Street Lincoln is apparently wearing modest trousers and boots, much as Lincoln himself actually did, and at least the remaining portions of the figurine do not refer to Lincoln’s role in Emancipation. This was in keeping with 1880s statuary conventions that stressed “realism” and the power of personality over idealized characterizations and contrived physical representations.

Such realism was reflected in a prominent Lincoln monument completed in Chicago in 1887 (Savage 1997:122). The Chicago statue depicted Lincoln standing alone before a chair, without accompanying devices such as scrolls, and it placed him in relatively accurate period clothing. This depiction suggested Lincoln had just risen to speak to the statue’s viewers, his hair somewhat disheveled, his clothes rumpled, but his gaze solidly set forward: This sort of figure displayed no clear historical judgment but instead stressed ambiguous personality attributes that a knowledgeable audience could connect to their notion of Lincoln’s symbolism and place in history. Discarded the same year as the Chicago monument was unveiled, the Linden Street Lincoln figurine appears to reflect a similar vision of Lincoln as a powerful personality more clearly allied with wisdom and morality than Emancipation.

Conceding African Americans a material representation in public space or a parlor was akin to confirming their newly won citizenship or even implying their genuine rights, and no consumers devoted to white superiority were likely to make either concession willingly. Newly arrived immigrants who were themselves subject to racism and xenophobia were among the most likely parties to object to public African American representations. For instance, in the 1880s a sculptor submitted a design for a New York statue that depicted a kneeling slave alongside Lincoln, but in 1890 the New York Times reported that the design had been rejected because “the figure of a negro in a public monument would arouse the resentment of the Irish citizens” (Savage 1997:81-82). Irish immigrants were marginalized by racism themselves and often associated with highly stigmatized blackness. Consequently, depictions of African Americans would seem particularly unlikely motifs among Irish Americans like Linden Street residents Patrick and Ellen Barry. Lincoln alone was a relatively “safe” symbol, but when depicted alongside an African American or some other highly charged motif the object posed more complicated historical and racial symbolism. The figurine of Lincoln as an ambiguous moral force and fount of American wisdom likely had allure to those immigrants who aspired to citizen privileges, and Lincoln was sufficiently ambiguous to represent anything from Republican partisanship to nationalist wisdom to their consumers’ willing embrace of American history.
ASPIRATION, AFFLUENCE, AND PRESIDENTIAL TRINKETS

The Barry family’s ca. 1887 refuse, found in Privy 4234 at 816-818 Linden Street, may reflect the material aspirations of this working-class family. Among the plain white ceramics, glasses, and tumblers are display items such as the fancy etched glass decanter and the large scalloped fruit bowl.

The redware Linden Street Lincoln figure suggests more about aspirations than genuine material affluence. By the 1880s, redware had long been a passé medium for virtually any ceramic production except flowerpots, and it was an uncommon and generally inexpensive form in decorative figurines. The Lincoln figure’s cost was not necessarily a critical factor in shaping the object’s meaning, but in dominant decorative ideology, redware was not a particularly desirable medium. The rest of the assemblage, however, does at least suggest some aspirations to the material trappings of gentility. The assemblage included four flowerpots, a partial porcelain figurine, table glass including an etched decanter, and a preponderance of white-bodied ceramics that presented a relatively uniform table assemblage. Ultimately much of the bric-a-brac recovered from working-class and otherwise marginalized contexts like that on Linden Street suggests more about its consumers’ aspirations for self-determination and citizen privileges than their actual social and material advance. Especially for newly arrived immigrants and Americans subordinated by racism or poverty, apparently innocuous household goods provided a modest but significant mechanism that situated them in relation to the ambiguous genteel mainstream. Household material culture was significant in Victorian eyes because it symbolically idealized consumer identity, and bric-a-brac’s rich symbolism provided a foothold for many Americans aspiring to the social and material prospects of consumer affluence.
“THAT MIDDLE STATE”: DESIRE, AMBITION, AND BRIC-A-BRAC

The powerful desire for material things has long plagued and baffled consumer society’s critics, yet most critics have attempted to impose behavioral codes and evade the thorny question of why people want goods at all. In 1860, for instance, Florence Hartley aspired to discipline the women gathered at window displays and suppress the hedonism supposedly unleashed by department stores. Without contemplating what drew Americans to consumer space, Hartley concluded that a “lady who desires to pay strict regard to etiquette, will not stop to gaze in the shop window. If she is alone, it looks as if she were waiting for someone else; and if she is not alone, she is victimizing some one else, to satisfy her own curiosity” (1860:112-113). Lelia Hardin Bugg’s *The Correct Thing for Catholics* echoed that it was improper to “make a tour of the shops, pulling down and examining goods, pricing articles, and taking up the time of the salesmen, when there is no intention of buying anything” (1891:137). Neither observer could actually understand material desire, so they simply hoped to regulate it.

This sort of conservative counsel became quite exceptional in the late-19th century. As Hartley and Bugg vainly beseeched their readers to quell consumer desire, marketers introduced a variety of mechanisms that encouraged consumers’ imagination, anticipation, and desire. Late-19th-century department store planners busily erected stunning plate glass window scenes to entice consumers to imagine the symbolic possibilities of goods, and they organized floor spaces so that consumers would wander and purchase goods from impulse. Theodore Dreiser’s novel *Sister Carrie* described the distinctive experience such consumer spaces fostered: “There is nothing in this world more delightful than that middle state in which we mentally balance at times, possessed of the means, lured by desire and deterred by conscience or want of decision. When Carrie began wandering around the store amid the fine displays, she was in this mood” (1900:67).

Consumers like Sister Carrie negotiated the tensions between material desire and restraint, suspended in a “middle state” in which consumers weighed need and moderation against desire and pleasure. Colin Campbell (1987:86) traces the roots of this “desiring mode” to the 18th century, concluding that consumers experience a “state of enjoyable discomfort” in which wanting is itself as pleasurable as possessing an object(cf. Baudrillard 1988:24). Where Veblen posed the value of a good as its capacity to display identity, Campbell argues that use value resides in a good’s capacity to accommodate a consumer’s aspirations and imagination. It is essentially irrelevant whether or not objects satisfy their consumers’ oft-grandiose expectations or inchoate daydreaming; certainly commodities rarely if ever produce radical changes in peoples’ lives, but what is significant is the persistent belief that goods harbor or forebode such change. Rather than experience perpetual disappointment with goods, most consumers effortlessly project their imaginations onto new things.

Conservative ideologues rapidly reacted to the desires they believed were unleashed by consumer space and household goods. For instance, a chorus of physicians, religious figures, and authority types argued that women were particularly prone to psychological and medical conditions inflamed by shopping’s intense emotional stimulation (Abelson 1989). Philosopher Max Nordau argued in 1897 that shopping’s detrimental emotional arousal was common to most materialism: “The present rage for collecting, the piling up in dwellings, of aimless bric-a-brac . . . appear[s] to us in a completely new light when we know that [French psychologist] Mangan has established an irresistible desire among degenerates to accumulate useless trifles” (Saisselin 1984:63). In his sensation ally titled tome *The Nervous Housewife*, Abraham Myerson sounded a similar warning that materialism posed a substantial threat to moral order, social
structure, and the personal discipline of both men and women. He observed that, “what a man considers riches in anticipation is poverty in realization. Here again we deal with the mounting of desire” (Myerson 1920:117). Myerson voiced a common apprehension of ever-burgeoning material abundance when he observed “That society of all grades is restless with the desire for luxury seems without doubt . . . Modern capitalism reaps great wealth by developing the luxurious, the spendthrift tastes of the poor. It would be a peculiar poetic justice that will make that development into the basis of revolution” (1920:124).

Myerson may well have been standing at the heart of a revolution in the 1920s, when American identity became more closely linked to material consumption than faith, nationalism, ethnicity, or other once-unchallenged seeds of identity (Agnew 1990; Susman 1984). In 1929 for instance, Robert and Helen Lynd were somewhat taken aback when the “Middletown” (i.e., Muncie, Indiana) newspaper decreed that “The American citizen’s first importance to his country is no longer that of citizen but that of consumer. Consumption is a new necessity” (1929:88). The Lynds understood that this sentiment would have been quite remarkable a half-century before. Yet if Myerson and the Lynds were witnessing a “revolution,” it was an oddly conservative one that focused Americans’ “rights” on consumption, and not on civil, political, or material privileges that could only be secured through transformations in class structure, labor relations, or social inequality. Ronald Edsforth (1987), for instance, attributes 1920s autoworkers’ labor activism to working-classes’ desire to bolster their economic ability to purchase goods and preserve their leisure time, not a deep-seated zeal to unseat producer elite. In this sense, by the New Deal Americans were “fighting” to preserve their right to buy things, not to defend God, Country, and other ideological icons that stood at the heart of American identity a half-century before. Like many Americans, Abraham Myerson was apprehensive that unachievable consumer desires and unrelenting poverty threatened to produce class warfare, but the United States was not subsequently visited by class upheaval spearheaded by restless shoppers. If anything, the promise of consumer culture’s impending economic and material bounty may well have subdued class unrest. Even in the depths of the Depression, marginalized Americans often submitted to staggering social and material inequality under the assumption that affluence was possible for any American with the appropriate discipline, ambition, morals, and good fortune.

The groundwork for such widespread faith in American affluence was laid in the late 19th century. Despite all the moral weight of late 19th-century material discourses, Victorian Americans celebrated affluence much more than they lamented it. The Protestant ideology that shaped most household philosophizing in the second half of the 19th century was not really opposed to consumption in the first place, although religious and consumer ethics were diametrically opposed. Many Americans cherished the ideological notion of “affluence,” which in various quarters implied national might, industrial domination, widespread consumer prosperity, genteel middle-class culture, and white racial superiority. Affluence was satisfying to so many Americans because its proponents (especially in marketing) left the concept strategically undefined and simply evoked a wide range of hopeful but ambiguous emotions linked to consumption. Advertisers likely delivered the most resounding declaration of affluence, constructing a profoundly influential but completely distorted vision of American life and the power of material things. Much like bric-a-brac itself, advertising was what Roland Marchand (1985:xvii) calls a Zerspiegel, a mirror that distorts and selectively represents its subjects’ true image. Advertising seized upon salient popular ideologies—ranging from American industrial prowess to white superiority—and dramatized how such “values” were reproduced and affirmed by the consumption of particular goods.
The implications made by advertisers and other champions of affluence were made particularly believable by the genuine profusion of goods displayed in department stores, mail order wish books, and cities and towns where wealthy Victorians lived alongside scores of aspiring gentility. Department store magnates saw their new marketing spaces as “palaces” that provided a stunning architectural confirmation of bourgeois affluence, the onward march of democracy and Western civilization, and the educational role of consumption. John Wanamaker, for instance, built striking stores in Philadelphia and New York that included auditoriums, marble-columned courts, organ players, casts of classical sculpture, commissioned murals, and several hundred paintings purchased from the Paris salons (Saisselin 1984:45-46). Comparable department stores were in most American cities by the 1880s. In 1897, for example, English traveler George Steevens noted that the Emporium—the Bon Marche of San Francisco, and one of the numerous biggest stores on earth that this country boasts—finds it conducive to trade to woo its patrons by a band of music perched on a pedestal in the midst of a restaurant, and under a dazzlingly illuminated glass dome. It also has the happy idea of setting up a balustrade in the midst of one of the important departments, over which you can watch golden-haired maidens receiving cash and popping back change into gilt pneumatic tubes [1897:231-232].

For those consumers who did not venture into such consumer palaces, bric-a-brac also was available in a score of “notion stores,” chains, mail order catalogs, and as gifts from merchants (on notion stores in Oakland, see Anthony 1939:7).

THE ABUNDANT INTERIOR:
AFFluence, Clutter, and Eclecticism in Bric-a-Brac

Affluence certainly found a stunning material expression in the archetypal Victorian parlor replete with high-style furniture, mass-produced goods, art objects, and collectibles. Attacks on conspicuous luxury were not particularly common before the turn of the century, because many Americans began to entertain the notion of class mobility for the first time. An 1887 etiquette manual noted that a
dd great deal has been written by interested parties on the corruptibility of riches; about money being the root of evil; that riches do not make happiness; that poor people are happier than rich; that gold is a curse, and the cause of crime, &c. Now all this looks very well in theory, but who among my readers does not know that the very opposite is the result, and those who talk so much and preach so persistently on the curse of gold, are themselves very anxious to secure as much of this root of evil as possible for themselves and their families. Money is not a curse, but a blessing. . . . Poverty is the curse of the world [Union Publishing 1887:12-13].

Margaret Sangster echoed this sentiment when she remarked that “It is the fashion now to abuse rich men, and nag at them, and it makes many who are rich afraid of making any display; but comfort yourselves with the thought that it is righteous and just and proper that you should have all the comforts and luxuries your riches can procure you, so long as they are not demoralizing luxuries” (1897:409). These bold celebrations of affluence created a fertile environment for marketers, consumers, and critics of bric-a-brac alike.
The boldest celebrants of consumer affluence pioneered the stereotypical Victorian aesthetic in which an eclectic profusion of goods covered the complete household space. In 1897 a writer in *The Boston Cooking-School Magazine* enthused that “There cannot be too many beautiful buildings, statues, or paintings in the world, nor too much real taste, ornamental design, or artistic furnishing in our homes” (Parker 1897:8). Two decades earlier, though, decorative writer Clarence Cook had criticized the material glut in such rooms, noting that the “New-York parlor of the kind called ‘stylish,’ where no merely useful thing is permitted, and where nothing can be used with comfort, is always overcrowded” (1878:100). Cook was an early censor of superficial style’s victory over genuine functionality, yet he still argued that household spaces should be distinctive representations of the family’s personality. The notion of a highly personalized eclectic interior would come under withering attack by the turn of the century and eventually transform household decorative ideology. In Victorian discourse, “eclectic” typically referred to interiors that evinced no clear decorative scheme, particularly spaces favoring decorative volume and texture over functional simplicity. In the 1880s and 1890s, a stream of style mavens became increasingly critical of objects like bric-a-brac that had no genuine functional utility. These thinkers promoted “rational” interior designs that hearkened back to sparer, symmetrically balanced colonial precedents. This and related backlashes against eclecticism became the dominant thread of household ideology after about 1900, when the notion of decorative “harmony,” the resurrection of historical styles, and the rejection of superfluous ornamentation prompted sparer interior ideals (Brooks 1994:23-25).

A ca. 1885 privy at 654 Fifth Street provides one of the most ornate and eclectic examples of abundance in the West Oakland assemblages (Privy 900). The parcel containing a story-and-a-half residence had been owned by the Mann family since 1862 and included a variety of family members as residents until about 1885. New Hampshire-born brothers Benjamin and Frederick Mann were living in the home with Frederick’s wife Eunice and her three children in the late-1870s, and the brothers tried their hands at various ventures including farming, mining, speculating, and banking. The 1880 U.S. Census recorded the 53-year-old Frederick as a miner and his brother Benjamin as a “capitalist,” suggesting their similar entrepreneurial ambitions. By the time Eunice moved out of the house in about 1885 and discarded much of the house’s contents into the privy, both Frederick and Benjamin had died (the former around 1883 and the latter on New Year’s Eve 1884).

The Mann family privy contained a stylish assemblage of tableware including costly matching porcelains, decorated glassware, an earthenware candelabra, candlesticks, and specialized vessel forms such as spoonholders and gravy boats (Figure 4.3). The presence of a large matched set as well as coffee beans in the privy strongly suggests that the household entertained guests for both meals and coffee drinking. After eating at such a well-appointed dining table, the family likely retired to a parlor space decorated with Victorian bric-a-brac. The Manns’ assemblage included a variety of cut, etched, and painted stemware, a rather distinctive cobalt blue candlestick holder with a dolphin-shaped pedestal, cut glass lampshades, and several figurines and vases. These were all stylish Victorian goods, but by the 1880s few decorative ideologues would have counseled the household to use this array of objects together in a single assemblage. In fact, when writers criticized “eclecticism” and over-filled Victorian parlors, they were reacting to consumers like the Manns who displayed a rich range of stylistically and colorfully discordant household goods alongside each other. The otherwise enthusiastic household decorator Clara Parker warned against such decorative incongruity when she concluded that “In all things—walls, carpets, chairs, sofa-pillows, bric-a-brac, fancy-work—let there be not
loud or startling effects, a jumble of striking combinations” (1897:9). In contrast, consumer champions like the New York store Sypher and Company more eagerly celebrated consumers’ new prospects, concluding that “it is impossible that the old poverty of house-furnishing should ever come back. We shall no longer have rows of houses all alike inside. . . . Now we have individual tastes shown in our furniture, and they will be shown more and more as the means of gratifying them become more common” (1885:31-32). Designers and ideologues alike championed many specific models, but they agreed on the ideal of “uniformity”; i.e., the appearance that the room or house was furnished in a coordinated design (Grier 1988:30). This design scheme was ideally executed in one moment, which implied more expense than gradual, piecemeal decoration that covered several seasons or integrated passé items.

Much bric-a-brac was artistic or exotic, symbolism that was fundamentally a statement about consumers, not the place where the objects originated or the culture and time to which they referred. In the heady optimism of late-19th-century America, exotic bric-a-brac was a confirmation of nationalist power and affluence, a privately possessed verification of Western domination. The popular description of exotic peoples and places was itself ambiguous, ideological, and often racist: for example, American consumers’ vision of “Turkish style” was recreated in numerous households’ “Turkish corners” (cf. Brooks 1994:20), but that style had virtually nothing to do with Turkish history and culture. Typical of such exoticized decorative ideology was a 1903 household manual describing an “Oriental Scheme for [a] Smoking Den” that included a “cozy corner [which] has a Moorish crown” (Barnard, Sumner, and Putnam Company 1903:30). Few household ideologues actually plumbed the complexities of Westerners’ attraction to objects from other cultures and time, instead representing it as Americans’ distinctive curiosity. In 1885 the New York store Sypher and Company rhapsodized that Victorians
AFFORDABLE ART: PARIAN IN VICTORIAN PARLORS

The Manns' bric-a-brac included three objects of Parian ware, a popular decorative ceramic that was found in several West Oakland assemblages. In 1844 a technique was introduced that used alabaster or wax to mold statues more intricately than the molding process used to manufacture Staffordshire earthenware figurines (Briggs 1988:150). That year an English sculptor began to produce Parian ware, a bisque porcelain that used this molding process to render detailed and "lifelike" figurines and decorative objects. Parian had a look similar to marble, and a flood of English and American producers marketed it as "art" distinct from less detailed and cheaper earthenware or porcelain figurines. An 1846 English trade journal, for instance, noted that the potteries "attach very great importance to this material, as offering a valuable medium for the multiplication of works of a high order of art, at a price which will render them generally available" (Briggs 1988:150).

Parian was sufficiently expensive and uncommon that it would have been a distinctive object in an 1880s parlor. Parian had some symbolic distinction from most surrounding bric-a-brac because it was commonly marketed as an affordable objet d’art, rather than an indifferent commodity curio. Art in Victorian homes implied wealth and the elusive quality of aesthetic taste based on cultivation and education, but very few Americans could actually purchase or commission art for their parlors. Parian, though, blurred the boundary between art and commodity and provided a material means for aspiring gentility to apprehend art symbolically, socially, and as a collectible possession. Not surprisingly, the distinction between art and commodity was a distinction many genteel ideologues hoped to preserve rather than obscure. The snobbishness of artistic aesthetes was summarized in 1882 by Francis Marion Crawford, who concluded that "The eye, accustomed to the endless knickknack, bric-a-brac, and arabesque, can no longer follow the pure lines of a great statue, or grasp the drawing and the color of a master’s painting" (1882:90-91).

The Mann privy included several examples of the popular decorative ceramic Parian, including this vase. Objects like this vase were marketed as art for genteel "middle-class" consumers, and their symbolism often borrowed from Classical art or more ambiguous and evocative motifs like this feminine hand.

Parian often reproduced classical motifs and paragons of Western art, and the examples featured in exhibitions often were truly artistic creations, but most mass-produced Parian included subjects that were little different from those cast in other ceramic types. The Manns’ privy, for instance, included a striking 8-inch-tall vase molded in the form of a female hand grasping a lily-bud vase. Alongside it in the privy assemblage was a 6-inch by 5-inch Parian plaque depicting a well-dressed woman with a bundle on her head, rake over her shoulder, and a goat at her feet. A third Parian object in the privy appears to be a lid molded with a bird’s likeness, but it is too fragmented to definitively identify the motif or form.
take a very great interest in other peoples and in other countries, an interest so great that it has affected our whole way of living; not only our houses show it, but our pictures, our amusements, our books, our newspapers, and our dress. In our houses we give our love of adventure free play, and like to be reminded at every turn, of the fact that America, big as is her territory, is but a small part of the world [1885:8].

Americans may well have had a “very great interest” in non-Western peoples, but little bric-a-brac contained substantially realistic references to contemporary colonized peoples. If anything, exotics from recognizable or still-living cultures posed some threat that an extinct, idealized, or utterly vanquished group (e.g., Native Americans) did not pose (cf. Stewart 1993:148). The hazard of the “Other” was neutralized by bric-a-brac that grossly caricatured or did not clearly refer to the realities of colonized peoples’ lives; i.e., bric-a-brac was intended to distance its American consumer from such realities and verify what they already “knew” about themselves and their society. Most American consumers only “knew” the foreign producers of exotics through popular culture, or they encountered these peoples in the caricatured representations in mass-produced goods, so exotic bric-a-brac was unlikely to foster any genuine appreciation of the late-19th-century colonial world.

The most common West Coast exotics came from China and Japan. Most Californians had some genuine exposure to Chinese immigrants (if not Chinese culture), but popular ideologues painted a powerful racist caricature of the Chinese. Popular caricatures of groups like the Irish, African Americans, and Chinese were sufficiently resilient, widely repeated, and advantageous to so many other groups that the racist caricatures often assumed the status of reality; for example, outsiders often assumed the veracity of depictions such as the happy, lazy black or the perpetually drunk Irishman.

The West Oakland assemblages contained a vast range of Chinese- and Japanese-manufactured objects, and some probably were consumed for functionality or price as much as their unspoken capacity to summon forth various visions of the Orient. Yet many of these goods were consumed for their decorative exoticism as much as their table utility or ready availability. The Chapman household at 828 Myrtle Street (Privy 3300/Pit 301), for instance, discarded five Japanese porcelain vessels along with a Chinese porcelain vessel, a likely Oriental motif art pottery ware, and the two chamber-pot figurines introduced at the outset of this chapter (see Figure 4.1). Household writers

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**EXOTICISM**

Exoticism was central to late-19th-century visions of affluence. Since the 18th century, collectors had accumulated assemblages of goods from throughout the colonized and natural world, ranging from traditional craft goods to items from nature. Such goods were of course rare and difficult to acquire, so their accumulation and display by an erudite collector was a powerful ideological statement about elite collectors and their class power. Yet as the colonial world opened up over the 19th century, increasingly more exotic goods reached American consumers of modest means, and eventually bric-a-brac manufacturers themselves would produce goods depicting a wide range of colonial motifs. By 1885 Spelman’s Fancy Goods Graphic hawked a vast range of notions and reminded dealers, ”Everybody wants a collection” (Spelman 1885:137). The Spelman’s bric-a-brac catalog featured a typical range of exotic bric-a-brac from the colonial world, distant lands, and nature: Japanese and French fans, Egyptian Princess ceramic wall plaques, French Pug figurines, ceramic “Baskets of Darkies” (i.e., African American figurines), and 18-inch decorated alligators were among the curiosities gracing the massive catalog. By the second half of the 19th century, the consumption of exotic things was no longer the province of a small aristocratic elite, and unique, mass-produced, and foreign-made exotics alike were quite common in the archetypally cluttered Victorian parlor.
often counseled home decorators to use Japanese material goods; for instance, Clarence Cook decreed just 10 years after Japan was opened to foreign trade that

money is well spent on really good bits of Japanese workmanship. . . . A Japanese ivory-carving or wood-carving of the best kind, . . . one of their studies of animal life, or of the human figure, or of their playful, sociable divinities, pixie, or goblin, or monkey-man, has a great deal in it that lifts it above the notion of a toy [1878:102].

Cook’s description reflected how many observers reduced non-Western aesthetics to whimsical artistic styles divorced of their cultural footing and easily integrated and reinterpreted within genteel homes.

Several of the Chapmans’ Japanese vessels had absolutely no use-wear; for instance, one matching Kutani export cup and saucer show no clear saucer or cup base wear consistent with regular use. These vessels produced in northwest Japan feature colorful depictions of birds passing over leaning reeds, a traditional aesthetic representation of seasonal change (Figure 4.4). This illumination of Japanese tradition probably escaped the Chapmans, who more likely displayed these Oriental objects for their brilliant color, distinctive and exotic aesthetics, and insinuation of household worldliness. The bright Japanese palette would have been unlike the staid molding and overwhelmingly white-bodied ceramics favored by most period household ideologues. Cumulatively, the Chapmans’ distinctive chamber-pot figurines, bold but passé Rebekah-at-the-Well Rockingham teapot, and decorated table glass suggest that this house was decoratively eclectic. The Chapmans’ Rose Canton bowl likely was also a decorative vessel, since its elaborate overglaze scene is well-preserved, and even the household’s English vessels are elaborately decorated. For comparison, the Mann household at 654 Fifth Street was also eclectic and showy, but the Manns’ ceramic tableware were overwhelmingly stylish white-bodied vessels, and they had only two Chinese porcelain vessels.

The Chapmans’ attraction to this striking assemblage likely reflects a number of factors including the allure of exotic places and peoples. As a paperhanger Harry Chapman worked alongside house painters and likely developed a strong sense of decorative possibilities; so it is not surprising that he was attracted to the brilliant Japanese palette that was quite unlike the sedately white Victorian table. The Chapmans—in common with most American consumers—may have been attracted to exotic aesthetics in general, with no articulate interest in whether any given object was actually produced in a foreign place, had a cultural or historical story to tell, was displayed alongside similar sorts of items (e.g., Asian goods), and so on. For instance, a household at 1774 Atlantic Street discarded a stoneware dish in a molded lotus flower form, a typical motif in Japanese aesthetics (Well 7511). The vessel’s base, however, contains an unidentified mark that reflects the vessel’s probable origins in a West Coast art pottery

Figure 4.4. The Chapmans’ Asian ceramics. The Chapman household at 828 Myrtle discarded several brightly colored Japanese and Chinese ceramic items, some of which are pictured here (Privy 3300/Pit 3301).
(Figure 4.5). This vessel apparently went unused and has hints of rim wear that may reflect its display on edge, so it was an ornamental item much like the Chapmans’ bric-a-brac. It would appear that some households were less concerned with acquiring a “genuine” Japanese artifact than an object that incorporated exotic symbolism. A ca. 1906 feature at 812 Market Street contains a similar swath of colorful and exotic goods (Well 1703). Deposited in the wake of the earthquake, the Market Street assemblage includes colorful Victorian-style Majolica, a Chinese celadon vessel, a black-glazed refined redware teapot, and two Japanese ceramic vessels. While the assemblage did not include any figurines and only three flowerpots, it suggests a rich color palette and exotic styles similar to the Chapmans’ assemblage.

The ultimate exotic was a unique object, and many Victorians collected objects from nature or antiquity to display alongside their mass-produced bric-a-brac. The best evidence for such consumption in West Oakland comes from a privy at 768 Fifth Street deposited by the household of John and Katie Taylor and their teenage daughters (Pit 1753). The privy was filled in about 1884 with a relatively unremarkable assemblage of household refuse that included a small tea service and an assemblage of typical patent medicines, but alongside these objects nine prehistoric groundstone net weights were recovered. Their recovery in a discrete deposit indicates that they were discarded together during the formation of the pit fill and were likely collected by a household member. Clarence Cook was among the household writers who advocated display of such objects. He noted that a Victorian cabinet might be made a museum for the preservation of all the curiosities and pretty things gathered in the family walks and travels. The bubble-bottle of old Roman glass stirred in walking by one’s own foot in the ruined palace of the Caesars, and not bought in a shop; the Dutch drinking-glass, with the crest of William of Orange; the trilobites found in a New burgh stone-wall, or the box of Indian arrow-heads, jasper, and feldspar, and quartz picked up in a Westchester County field; bits of nature’s craft and man’s, gathered in one of these pendant museums, may make a collection of what were else scattered and lost, and which, though of little intrinsic value, and of small regard to see to, will often find its use in a house of wide-awake children [1878:101].

Such objects certainly were collected by enterprising West Oaklanders. For instance, in 1939 resident Fred D. Realey asked his readers of the *West of Market Boys’ Journal* if they remembered “when Shell Mound Park was an ancient village and when excavations were made of the mound. There were discovered numerous bones of Indians, shells, arrow and spear heads and other objects of interest that had been owned by the Indian tribes of other days” (1939:11). The park in nearby Emeryville became a well-known amusement center, and it is likely that some West
Oakland residents collected objects at this and other regional sites for their household assemblages. These net weights may well have been displayed alongside shells and similar objects taken from nature.

A ca. 1875 pit at 817 Market Street included several pieces of bric-a-brac and contained one of the project’s most unusual exotic items (Pit 3382). At the time the pit was filled, the residence was home to Charles Lufkin, a white Massachusetts-born lawyer and police inspector. Lufkin’s family and their boarders discarded a range of quite stylish decorative goods, including a Parian lid molded with the likeness of a sleeping cherubic figure, as well as two brightly painted porcelain figurines in colonial-style clothing. Alongside these items was recovered 150 beads that may have been discarded by dressmakers boarding with the Lufkins. These beads included three large translucent white beads known as “crackled white” that were made in 19th-century east and south Africa. Whether these beads were consumed as decorative curios or within normal beadwork is unknown, and their origins may well have been a mystery to the household members. Nevertheless, in a stylish genteel household that was sensitive to exoticism, such objects likely attracted some notice, even if they did not secure a spot in the parlor.

The bounds of exoticism stretched into prehistory and distant lands, and they also reached into nature. Victorian interiors often included a variety of goods taken from nature, such as unusual sea shells, dried wood, or taxidermed animals, and potted plants and flowers were customary items in genteel space. Much like the collection of goods manufactured by “primitive” peoples, Victorians’ consumption of natural objects was self-referential and likely reflects apprehension over the seemingly ever-widening divide between culture and nature. For some collectors, the placement of a strange shell under glass was verification of the Western world’s transcendent ability to explain the world, if not its triumph over nature. A flowering plant in their parlor essentially confirmed Man’s mastery over nature and a genteel householder’s cultivated ability to appreciate natural beauty. Other observers were apprehensive of a Victorian world of convoluted social conventions, hypnotic mass advertising, and ever-increasing social complexity, nostalgically seeing the nation ripped from its orderly traditional past and once-intimate relationship with “nature.” Their attraction to shells and flowers was more clearly based in an ideological sentiment for simplicity.

The West Oakland assemblages contained a vast quantity of shells, but most were either imported as food, like eastern oysters, or locally available, like abalone. The archaeological assemblages contain clearer evidence for the “display” of live animals. Some Victorians decorated their homes with taxidermed animals, but for those decorators unable to obtain a stuffed animal, live animals were a common alternative. The West Oakland assemblages included a minimum of 22 bird feeders or bird baths and at least one fish bowl. Fish bowls and glass bird feeders are atypical vessel forms that are often highly fragmented, and archaeologists rarely if ever expect to recover such objects, so these usually go unrecognized unless they are recovered intact, which is quite uncommon. The presence of marijuana seeds in a privy at 1774 Atlantic Street likely also reflects the presence of birds; bird feed often was laced with marijuana to induce more boisterous songbird performances. Bird feeders and cages clearly had symbolic significance. For instance, one woman remembered that in the aftermath of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake “all of a sudden we saw all these people coming, with no clothes on, bird cage and whatnot. See, San Francisco was burning” (Schwerin 1981:5). Naked San Franciscans fleeing the city with their birdcages was not likely a common sight, but it does suggest the significance of such goods.
MODELING PARLORS:
DECORATIVE AESTHETICS AND PULLMAN CARS

Victorian aesthetics were dynamic and eclectic, yet irresolute parlor-makers did not want for public spaces modeling appropriate decorative codes. Katherine Grier (1988:23) argues that dominant parlor aesthetics found their most influential expression in commercial spaces such as hotels, steamboats, and railroad cars that modeled the arrangement of goods in private household parlors. Between about 1830 and 1880, consumers could mull over and assess idealized parlors in public commercial spaces (e.g., hotels), exhibition models (e.g., the 1876 Centennial Exhibition), and department store displays. A string of exhibitions in Europe and the United States provided one of the most significant catalysts for elite Victorian decorative codes. After the Paris Exhibition of 1878 (Williams 1982), for instance, West Oakland’s stunning McDermott estate added exhibition goods to a high-style Victorian interior (Figure 4.6). The 10 August 1878 Oakland Times reported that

The rooms are beautifully frescoed in oil colors, and have elegant French furniture. The windows all have elegant silk hangings with rich curtains to match. In the parlor may be seen a Watteau painting of great value . . . [and] bric a brac from the Paris Exposition. . . . In another room a pair of screens, Chinese work, embroidered on white silk . . . birds, nearly a hundred in number are represented flying about and at rest among flowers [cited in Olmsted and Olmsted 1994:126-127].

For those consumers who could not venture to Paris, Wannamaker’s department store included 44 furnished period rooms designed to “enable architects and homemakers to study and select proper furniture and home adornments, and to enable them to individualize their homes from the mere commercial furnishing way” (Saisselin 1984:47). Perhaps the most interesting difference between these public and domestic parlors was that the former rarely included much bric-a-brac and almost never integrated photographs (Grier 1988:38). This suggests that many ideologues understood bric-a-brac to be a personal expression distinct from the dominant codes set out to regulate, for instance, furniture selection or carpet decoration in public spaces and household parlors alike (Figure 4.7). Some ideologues aspired to eliminate bric-a-brac altogether because of its eclecticism, but most model spaces apparently steered clear of this personalized dimension of household decorative ideology.

Railroad cars numbered among public parlor spaces in which many Americans experienced ideal parlor schemes. Many West Oaklanders worked for the railroads, so they likely worked and traveled in elaborately decorated Pullman railroad cars. Luxurious railroad cars became quite common by the 1850s, providing well-appointed men’s and women’s parlors as well as sleeping quarters that were adorned with the most stylish window curtains, paintings, upholstered chairs and benches, woodwork, and carpets (Grier 1988:47). George Pullman’s Pullman Palace Car Company was founded in 1867, and Pullman and his fleet of well-appointed cars became symbols of American luxury, affluence, and monopolism. In 1897 English traveler George Steevens wrote that the American “sleeping car is a miracle of luxury. All the wood is mahogany—or looks like it—and all the cushions are velvet. It looks as rich and solid as the British dining-room of the old school” (1897:258). Steevens rhapsodized that some trains had dining cars with “tables and comfortable seats ranged down it” at which “you are well served, well fed, and not heavily charged” (1897:259). Pullman cars also had “a drawing-room car with easy-chairs” and “the observation car,” providing a traveler a model Victorian household on the
Figure 4.6. The front parlor: an affluent Victorian public space. In the late 19th century, West Oakland’s own McDermott house provided a clear model for the exoticized and affluent Victorian parlor. Described as a "front parlor," this room was likely the household’s public social space, and it contained choice examples of most of the standard parlor goods. The room had, among other features, oil paintings, a grand piano, silk drapes, Chinese silk screens, and one quite prominent figurine of an eagle or bird of prey standing watch over the room. (Photo reproduced with permission from Vernon J. Sappers)

Figure 4.7. The rear parlor: a more familiar space. The McDermott House’s rear parlor contained numerous references to domesticity and family in the form of photographs, craft work, well-behaved dolls, flowers, and a bookcase from which an appropriately genteel patriarch might read to his family around the fire. (Photo reproduced with permission from Vernon J. Sappers)
rails (Steevens 1897:260). In the early 1890s, Pullman suggested that the introduction of luxurious material culture to lowly rail cars was intended to have the same “civilizing” effect as domestic parlors: “Take the roughest man, a man whose lines have always brought him into coarsest and poorest surroundings, and the effect upon his bearings is immediate. The more artistic and refined the mere external surroundings, in other words, the better and more refined the man” (Grier 1988:61).

Any well-appointed Victorian home had servants, and Pullman cars had a universally African American service staff that included many West Oakland residents. The cars had lavish material outfitting and were graced by efficient and cultivated African American service, but African American laborers faced many of the same daily personal and social indignations people of color faced throughout the country. Porters received good pay in comparison to most working-class labor, but the position consumed long hours, the work was difficult, and porters were subjected to standard anti-black racism (Spires 1994:207). For instance, George Steevens was loathe to share his passage with class “inferiors,” but he was willing to accept some modest amount of working-class interaction in the dining car: “At the passengers’ table they eat quite correctly—except, of course, the blacks; it would be going too far to admit them” (1897:263).

DIFFERENT EXPRESSIONS OF SOCIAL ASPIRATION

Two Fifth Street households were headed by Central Pacific Railroad porters who certainly would have been well-acquainted with the decor of Pullman parlors. Between 1877 and 1882 porter Abraham Holland lived at 662 Fifth Street with widow Lucinda Tilghman, two of her children, and an African American domestic who, like Holland, was also boarding with the Tilghmans (Privy 900). Born about 1840 in Pennsylvania, Holland had served as a porter for the Central Pacific Railroad since at least 1874. Documentary evidence paints a

DOMESTICITY IN THE PARLOR

The material factors that made Victorian parlors and bric-a-brac consumption are relatively clear: by the mid-19th century, cheap mass-produced furnishings had flooded the market, and an ever-expanding and newly moneyed “middle class” confirmed its new affluence by purchasing such goods. The social factors that made parlor-making possible or desirable, though, are more complicated than the objective economics that permitted factory growth, market expansion, and increasing disposable incomes. Fundamentally, parlor-makers’ consumption negotiated a basic tension between material affluence and social conservatism. Consumers were torn between, on one hand, an often-powerful desire to celebrate expanding American affluence and, on the other, a somewhat conservative and contradictory desire for a stable social order and domestic value code (cf. Grier 1988:2). Gentility and domesticity were a pair of ill-fitting ideologies: the former implied a household’s awareness of worldly high culture, affluence, and Victorian style, yet the latter evoked deep-seated familial ideology and the home as the fount of conservative values. In the face of such contradictions, objects were intended to show that a consumer could be both affluent and morally disciplined, both genteel and domestic.

The discrepancies in such ideology yielded predictably contradictory behaviors. Henry Ward Beecher, for instance, cautioned readers in 1853 that riches and goods were not the fount of satisfaction, a common lament of observers who were concerned that an embrace of materialism necessarily entailed a rejection of moral discipline and spirituality. Beecher, however, was loathe to admit that his own store debts were so high during the 1850s that he was compelled to go on the lecture circuit and preach frugality to settle the earthly damages of his own consumer hedonism (Horowitz 1985:11). Underneath the veneer of conservative moralism, many Americans like Beecher nurtured an apparently inconsistent material desire that complicated their puritanical rhetoric.
convincing picture of Holland as aspiring African American gentility. Holland apparently was part of the African American managed Sweet Vengeance Mine that was active in Brown Valley between 1848 and 1854. The operation persisted throughout the Gold Rush period and survived a host of white claim-jumpers to make some genuine claim to profitability: a local newspaper reported that in one week of April 1852 the mine produced “rich dirt, we have taken $1200,” and less than a month later it yielded another $1142 in a good week. The miners reportedly sent a significant share of these profits South to purchase the freedom of enslaved relatives.

Like many African Americans in the West, Holland may have been more devoted to personal material advance than the social climbing that typified the African American elite in the East. Genteel African American circles in the East were highly structured hierarchies defined by factors such as ancestry, rigid behavioral codes, education, and skin color. In the West, family heritage counted for little because no family could make a claim to long-term community status; likewise, Eastern color lines had far less consequence in the West (Gatewood 1993:138). East Coast African American newspapers devoted extensive attention to socializing among the “upper tens,” but West Coast papers spent little ink on such matters. Instead, these West Coast African American newspapers focused more on individual initiative and personal wealth, which are stereotypical Western values. Willard Gatewood (1993:138) suggests that African Americans in cities like San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Seattle were generally more firmly committed to the notion of a self-made man and class mobility than Easterners.

Nevertheless, there still remained quite aristocratic sentiments among African Americans in the West, and Holland may well have entertained these. At the end of the Civil War, California was among the 16 states with African American Masonic lodges, and by 1874 Holland had become a Mason. The Masons were among the most class-conscious, well-educated, and elitist of African American fraternal organizations, but San Francisco’s African American community was so small that class lines were much more fluid than in the East (Gatewood 1993:131, 212). Holland eventually ascended to the position of local Grand Master in 1878-1880, and he added to his Masonic membership a standard inventory of genteel African American social activities. In 1886, for instance, he was the president of Oakland’s Literary and Aid Society. This likely was a typical African American “culture club” whose educational and social missions ranged from reading classical literature to promoting Republican candidates (Gatewood 1993:214). Literary societies were by far the most common African American clubs, and most were directed by local elite. By 1891 Holland also was serving as director of the Colored Colonization Society of Fresno County, but the specific function of this organization is unclear. Holland also sent a son to college, which would have been routine among East Coast African American elite.

The material assemblage at 662 Fifth Street does not suggest the ostentatious materialism commonly associated with genteel Victorians. Abraham Holland certainly was a prominent figure in his community, and Lucinda Tilghman was financially comfortable if not wealthy, but their early 1880s privy contains a somewhat restrained genteel assemblage. The privy does not contain any bric-a-brac with the exception of two flowerpots. The household’s genteel ambitions are suggested by porcelain and white-bodied ceramics that were the height of 1870s table styles, as well as a host of grooming objects (e.g., combs, toothbrushes, and hair-tinge bottles), a French porcelain brush holder, and several pieces of jewelry. At least 57 glass chimney lamps were represented in the assemblage, as well as two porcelain candlesticks, a very high number of lighting artifacts compared to other West Oakland assemblages. The household had stylish material culture, but unlike the vastly more eclectic Mann privy at 654 Fifth Street, the Tilghman/ Holland assemblage does not have a preponderance of objects that are stylistically mismatched.
Even the ceramics that were not purchased as parts of matching sets were the same color and basic shapes, so they could easily have been used together. The Mann privy would have presented a more eclectic appearance in colors, motifs, and shapes and likely contained more “clutter” of typical parlor goods.

Pullman Palace Car Company porter James William Carter and his wife Nellie lived nearby at 668 Fifth Street (Well 953). Between 1889 and 1896, the household filled a 14-foot deep redwood-lined feature that likely was a well. The feature contained men’s, women’s, and children’s shoes, suggesting that a range of ages was included in the household. Like the Tilghman/Holland assemblage deposited roughly a decade earlier, the Carter assemblage does not reflect particularly pretentious parlor materialism. The Carter assemblage contains a ceramic assemblage dominated by relatively inexpensive white-bodied earthenware, a wide variety of decorated glass table vessels, and 50 saucers that include examples of almost every conceivable decorative type. While the assemblage included six redware flowerpots, several vases, and a clock, it did not include any figurines. Like the Tilghman/Holland household, the Carter household apparently favored a somewhat spare and coordinated interior.

Southern Pacific Railroad employees at 1774 Atlantic Street apparently had a considerably more eclectic and exoticized interior than that favored by the two porters’ households on Fifth Street. The Atlantic Street residence was home to several African American families and one Irish immigrant’s household who lived in the structure over short successive periods, so the assemblage cannot be reliably attributed to a specific household (Well 7511). The African American men living in the home were all Pullman porters, and the Irish family was headed by a Southern Pacific laborer and a laundress. Unlike the more restrained Fifth Street assemblages, the early to mid-1890s Atlantic Street assemblage includes a wide range of decorative goods. The assemblage contains five vases, including two 4-inch matching blue glass bud vases (Figure 4.8), a lotus motif stoneware dish, and two porcelain figurines, one of a colonial figure and the other apparently a jester.

This Atlantic Street assemblage’s visible household aesthetic may reflect one of many different material forms taken by class aspiration. Archaeologists tend to assume that class achievement takes the form of costly material assemblages, sidestepping the significant social dimensions of class and communal status. Class status was often secured through social relationships, such as fraternal memberships or church standing, and in Eastern and Midwestern African American circles such affiliations typically carried more status than wealth or materialism. Abraham Holland’s entrepreneurialism, Masonic membership, and social position in community culture societies strongly suggest aspirations to social mobility and some communal status. The Atlantic Street residents likely had similar ambitions, but they may have chosen to express those aspirations more visibly in objects than social networks. Willard Gatewood (1993:138) suggests that West Coast African Americans were more individualistic and materially ambitious than their peers in the Midwest or East, so African American status in cities like San Francisco was less vested in social networks and genteel performance than wealth. The Atlantic Street residents
may reflect this more visible West Coast material aesthetic, which certainly was not unique to African Americans. The Atlantic Street residents were marginalized by both racism and economic marginalization, like many of their West Oakland neighbors; yet subordinated consumers like these households sometimes purchased costly or distinctively showy material goods to distance themselves from the material realities and social stigmatization of penury. The son of a West Oakland grocery store owner pointed out that his father would “always have black people who liked goods things. . . . Everybody has priorities. You’d see poor Mexican people come in here, and they’d buy a good bottle of Spanish brandy. Everybody wants something they want once-in-a-while” (Mousalimas 1980:18). This marketer’s son recognized that economic determinism often does not explain consumer behavior, and he at least alluded to the often unspoken assumption that poverty and racial stigmatization go hand-in-hand. Bric-a-brac actually provides a relatively imprecise mechanism to evaluate class standing, but its presence often provides a sensitive insight into class aspirations. This visible material aesthetic does not reveal any self-evident ethnic “pattern,” but it is significant that African Americans entertained these ambitions at all. Certainly many African Americans went West precisely because they believed they might escape strenuous everyday racism and stand an improved chance of securing their own share of American affluence. What may be most critical about these African American bric-a-brac assemblages is not that they necessarily stand out from the remainder of the community but that they instead look quite similar. Ultimately these African American consumers were still subject to persistent and dehumanizing racism, but in the face of racism they used a range of social networks and material assemblages to secure some share of American affluence that was supposedly denied to them by blackness (see also Chapter 10).

RELIGION AND DOMESTICITY IN THE VICTORIAN PARLOR

In the mid-1880s, Daniel and Adelaide Robinson apparently secured a sewer connection for their home at 1814 Atlantic Street and began to gradually fill their privy with discards including glass tableware, tea or coffee equipage, and two figurines (Privy 6325). The Robinsons’ roughly 1,700-square-foot home included a parlor and dining room that suggest some pretensions to gentility, and the Nova Scotia-born Daniel Robinson eventually ascended from a carpenter to foreman with the Central Pacific Railroad. One of the Robinsons’ figurines was a 2-3/4 inch glazed porcelain figurine of a praying character now missing its feet and head (Figure 4.9). The figure has its hands clasped to its chest in prayer and is wearing a skirt tied off at the waist, a pious Victorian curio typical of the broadly religious imagery reproduced in bric-a-brac. A vast range of Protestant or ambiguously religious bric-a-brac was marketed to Victorians, and the moral discourses surrounding household material culture were saturated with various tenors of spirituality, but this figurine is the sole evidence of religious-themed bric-a-brac in the West Oakland assemblages.

Objects’ spiritual connotations figured prominently in many material discourses, reflecting the commonplace Victorian conjecture that a materialistic (and increasingly non-Protestant) society lacked a spiritual center. Between about 1840 and 1900, a host of ideologues championed an ostensibly unchallenged and universal Bible-based religion that Colleen McDannell calls “domestic Protestantism” (1992:172-173). These thinkers de-emphasized denominational divides and focused on the home as the social and material framework for Christian morals. Gothic Revival architects, for instance, emphasized the structural and disciplinary parallels between church and home design (McDannell 1992:162). Gothic Revival designers believed that the
home itself could shape Christian morals even if its inhabitants did not recognize the architecture’s influence. A vast range of mass-produced Christian material culture could be purchased to adorn pious Victorian homes, including paperweight crosses, ceramics with molded or printed religious scenes, and a variety of figurines of Biblical characters. Such material culture was intended to fortify deteriorating religious authority over the second half of the 19th century, and that erosion of church domination certainly had a direct relationship to the consumer culture that was simultaneously emerging (Curtis 1991). Consumer culture destabilized organized religion in the late-19th century, when many Americans began to see their individual (if not national) hopes invested in the material world more than the church. T.J. Jackson Lears (1983:6) argues that in an increasingly complex world that fostered feelings of “unreality,” Americans became absorbed in the immediate pleasures offered by consumer space and disillusioned by the deferred gratification promised by religion. In many quarters, the influence of the church deteriorated as Americans became disenchanted by the moral and personal self-discipline that religion demanded.

The paucity of self-evident religious objects in West Oakland is not necessarily a sign of eroded spirituality, rather, it may reflect a typical turn-of-the-century vision of a broadly defined spirituality that was not focused on conventional church discipline. In a community that included many different ethnic collectives, churches remained among West Oakland’s most important vehicles of class and ethnic identity. Nevertheless, some Oakland churches apparently followed the common trend to broaden their service to the community and become vehicles for community as well as individual morality. Several area churches, for instance, ran schools, and most orchestrated a full calendar of events like bingo, bake sales, clubs, and bazaars with varying degrees of charity and service involved (Olmsted and Olmsted 1994:129; Hattersley-Drayton 1997:196). In the face of a transforming church, many moralists fashioned a broadly based spirituality that loosened churches’ traditional rigorous discipline. Charles Richmond Henderson, for instance, was a Baptist clergyman who served as both the university clergyman and sociology professor at the University of Chicago after 1892 (Malone 1932:524). Henderson attacked pretentious materialism, noting that to “the student of history and economics the insulting excuses and praises of extravagance and barbarian ostentation are as exasperating as the spectacle itself is revolting when placed in contrast with the misery which is near it” (1897:259). In this vision, the morality of genteel Americans—indeed, their spiritual well-being—was itself blemished by their willing evasion of material inequality. This notion of morality cast all social and material practice as spiritually significant, extended the purview of faith beyond narrowly defined church activities, and threatened to erode the divisions between society’s elite and disenfranchised.

The ideological definition of women as nurturers and guardians of family morality was among the most prominent themes in 19th-century material discourses. New England moralists, for instance, were quite influential in championing the notion that the home was a familial, Christian space appropriately controlled by women (e.g., Beecher and Stowe 1869, 1873). The dilemma of constructing home as a separate feminine sphere after the mid-19th century was
that women were securing new and significant powers as household consumers in public space; to undermine that power, many patriarchal ideologues aspired to limit women’s’ roles to parenting, spousal support, and household labor. Consequently, consumer space offered women the opportunity to instill sound morality by appropriately furnishing their homes; however, that same consumer space offered up a host of inappropriate if not degenerate goods, as well as the alluring enticement of unbridled material desire (cf. McDannell 1992:172-173).

A chorus of moralists stubbornly aspired to convince women to willingly remove themselves from consumer space. For instance, The Household noted in 1887 that

Mothers . . . will do your family and the world in general much more good by saving your strength and precious time for the improvement of your higher faculties, than by using them to furnish your table with fancy dishes and ornament your house with fancy work. . . . If we realize the true insignificance of worldly things compared with spiritual, it will probably not be spent in pursuit of worldly pleasure [1887:23].

Promoting flight from consumer space was at best naively romantic. Household authors generally sounded exaggerated warnings of the dangers posed by commodities, but popular writers typically hyperbolize concrete dilemmas to accentuate their threat. Americans have never been warm to the idea of utterly forsaking consumption, but eloquent writers recurrently summon forth long-standing anxieties about the social, personal, and spiritual effects of materialism (e.g., Ewen 1988; Frazier 1957; Packard 1957; Patten 1907; Thoreau 1854; Veblen 1899).

Many conservative ideologues believed that familial morality could be fostered by women who manufactured their own household decorative goods. Mary Elizabeth Sherwood (1881:120), for instance, advocated that women purchase a few modest commodities and place them alongside homemade craft goods. This was a common counsel by thinkers who viewed commercial space and home life as separate realms and were troubled by the use of mass-produced goods to symbolize domestic values (cf. Grier 1988:8). Sherwood, for instance, noted that “The poorest woman can now with very little money make a pretty room. . . . Good engravings, a little

### SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGIOUS BRIC-A-BRAC

West Oakland families may well have seen their homes as spiritual spaces, despite the paucity of religious objects. As with all bric-a-brac, curation itself likely was quite rigorous, so few of these goods were actually discarded. It also is likely that some households had religious prints or objects such as Bibles that do not appear in archaeological assemblages. Robert and Helen Lynd (1929:100), for instance, noted that pictures were found in most 1920s working-class homes in Middletown. A household’s prints could have popular motifs, be hand-drawn by a family member, or, “if the family is of a religious bent, [include] colored mottoes: ‘What will you be doing when Jesus comes?’ or ‘Prepare to meet thy God.’” Jewelry crosses, rosaries, and religious symbols were recovered in West Oakland (see sidebar Chapter 6 “Crosses and Witch Balls”), but archaeological material culture suggests that Oakland’s residents expressed conventional religion in social and material forms other than household decorative goods. Excavations in comparable turn-of-the-century sites reflect a similar paucity of mass-produced religious bric-a-brac. For instance, archaeology in middle- and working-class Los Angeles households included no explicit religious motifs in mass-produced decorative goods (Costello et al. 1998; cf., Gums 1998; Mullins 1999; M. Praetzellis and A. Praetzellis 1990, 1992b). Chinese sites in the region include objects with mythical symbolism (e.g., Greenwood 1996:123-124), and secular artifacts certainly could have been invested with mythical or spiritual significance of some sort, but the flood of mass-produced religious trinkets available to Victorian consumers apparently did not find its way into West Oakland’s refuse.
cretonne, some knick-knacks made by herself, a few grasses, a growing plant, and an open fire are all that are needed to make a room pleasant and refined.” Such rooms fashioned from household handiwork were typically understood as the appropriate spaces for feminine expression. In 1898 Margaret Sangster argued that a home was fundamentally feminine because women had intensely emotional feelings for objects:

Does a man live who understands how a woman clings to her “things,” her furniture, her chairs and tables, her carpets and her curtains? . . . A woman knows how fond she grows of the old desk where she writes her letters, of the rocking-chair in which she sang lullabys to her babies, of the old clock which has ticked away the happy hours of all her life. Inanimate things, but so interwoven with the very woof of our emotions and very fibre of our hearts, that they seem as if endowed with sense and emotion [1898:304].

In contrast, George Santayana’s novel The Last Puritan described such a space in a Newport, Rhode Island, household from the disparaging perspective of a patriarchal Boston Puritan:

The room was littered with little sofas, little armchairs, little tables, with plants flowering in porcelain jars, and flowers flaunting in cut-glass bowls, photographs in silver frames, work baskets, cushions, footstools, books and magazines, while the walls were a mosaic of trivial decorations (not the work of deserving artists like those in his own house), but etageres with knick-knacks and bric-a-brac, feeble watercolours, sentimental engravings, and slanting mirrors in showy frames [1936:34].

In contrast to Margaret Sangster, Santayana’s character favored a “masculine” space expressed in less emotional works of art (Saisselin 1984:65-66).

The evidence for such idealized feminine parlors in West Oakland is, at best, very scarce. Some objects fashioned from fabric or otherwise fragile mediums would not survive archaeologically, but the West Oakland assemblages contain no clear evidence of homemade craft objects. Some mass-produced commodities in the assemblages do suggest a measure of creativity beyond simply arranging store-bought goods. For instance, among the material goods Sherwood and like-minded thinkers recommended were plants and flowers. It is infeasible to attribute all the material evidence of plants in the West Oakland assemblages to domesticated female homemakers, but the sites do contain numerous flowerpots and wall vases that indicate the presence of houseplants and flowers. The sites also contain a handful of picture frames that likely held family photographs. Nevertheless, there is no evidence to indicate that these householders were busily fashioning a stereotypical moral space from their own craft goods, and it is not clear how many consumers anywhere embraced such counsel. Indeed, Sherwood herself was unable to take her own advice, and her ostentatious lifestyle produced a terrible debt by 1890 (James, James, and Boyer 1971, 3:284-285). She was compelled to sell the stunning furnishings in her Manhattan home and retreat to a hotel while her husband was in Europe, and upon his return John Sherwood suffered a swift psychological decline and died in 1895.

Conservative domestic ideology never disappeared, but it also was never universally embraced. In 1910, for instance, Bertha June Richardson’s volume The Woman Who Spends proclaimed that “the time has come when women feel the need of study and training in the economics of consumption, otherwise known as the spending of money. . . . Today it is the woman who spends, and upon her rests the responsibility for the standards that govern the spending for the home and community” (1910:21-22). This was a vision of women’s position in public consumer space as empowering, not one of hysterical shoppers overcome by marketplace fervor.
"REAL" BRIC-A-BRAC

This ginger jar, found at the bottom of Annie Brady’s abandoned well at 812 Castro Street, may have been a decorative item (Well 968).

The consumption of “real” exotic goods (or quality craft objects like the Atlantic Street lotus dish) was sometimes considered an important antidote to the crudely executed flood of mass-produced goods. In 1898, for example, The House Beautiful noted, “if a poor man’s taste demands a statuette, he is unable to purchase one of Rodin’s marbles, and so attempts to satisfy his want by securing a [mass-produced] ‘Rodgers group.’ It would have been far better, for example, for him to have used an empty ginger jar for decoration” (The House Beautiful 1898:61-62). This comment augured the tone of many early-20th-century critics of mass-produced commodities; in this instance, The House Beautiful’s editors insinuated that the Chinese vessel was more “artistic” because the Chinese craft producer was not divorced from the object in the way mass-produced goods were detached from living craftspeople. The Brady household at 812 Castro Street may well have taken The House Beautiful’s advice. Terrence and Annie Brady had a four-room house that included a formal parlor; the “Japanese cabinet,” 23 “pictures” (probably chromolithographs), and 18 vases in Annie’s 1917 probate suggest the household still contained prototypical parlor furnishings long after parlors had become passé. The family’s circa 1889-1902 assemblage did not include any figurines, but it did include a Chinese ginger jar like that recommended by The House Beautiful. For most consumers, “the Orient” was a popular concept that evoked splendor, art, wisdom, despotism, and sensuality—concepts whose meaning was based more upon their tacit contrast to rational Western society than genuine understanding of the Far East (Said 1978). When Americans purchased Asian material goods they were consuming an idea about the contrast of East and West that was suitable for display in a genteel parlor where rational people could make sense of the Orient. Like all bric-a-brac, Asian material culture typically ends up saying vastly more about its consumers than the subjects it abstractly caricatures.
CONCLUSION

In the 1880s Jacob Riis trekked through New York City documenting Gotham’s “other half,” the impoverished masses of immigrants, people of color, and various other Americans forcefully excluded from affluence. Riis’ subsequent account, *How the Other Half Lives,* had a spectacular impact on the once-untroubled Gilded Age elite who consciously tolerated—if not condoned—profound poverty and marginalization in many places like New York. Yet, like many Victorians, even the morally indignant Riis was unable to subdue his own cultural xenophobia and racism and appreciate the complex aspirations that lurked beneath the surface of poverty. For instance, Riis seemed perplexed over why the “typical” African American

looks at the sunny side of life and enjoys it. . . . His home surroundings, except when he is utterly depraved, reflect his blithesome temper. The poorest negro's room in New York is bright with gaily-colored prints of his beloved “Abe Linkum,” General Grant, President Garfield, Mrs. Cleveland, and other national celebrities, and cheery with flowers and singing birds. In the art of putting his best foot foremost, of disguising his poverty by making a little go a long way, our negro has no equal. When a fair share of prosperity is his, he knows how to make life and home very pleasant to those about him. Pianos and parlor furniture abound in the uptown homes of colored tenants and give them a very prosperous air. But even where the wolf howls at the door, he makes a bold and gorgeous front. The amount of “style” displayed on fine Sundays on Sixth and Seventh Avenues by colored holiday-makers would turn a pessimist black with wrath [1890:118].

Riis reduced African American materialism to a contrived “front,” implying that even genteel objects like chromolithographs and parlor furniture failed to conceal the essential realities of poverty and racial identity. The well-heeled Riis knew many of New York’s most prominent Progressive citizens, so he was certainly well aware of the symbolism of Victorian material goods, but he was unable to fathom what such objects meant outside utterly genteel spaces. Riis expressed a paternalistic amusement at African American materialism and social ambition, even though he conceded that the African American was “loyal to the backbone, proud of being an American and of his new-found citizenship” (1890:118). Like many of his social reformer contemporaries, Riis was convinced that essential racial and class “traits” were substantial if not unyielding, and he determined that only transformations in objective housing conditions would create a disciplined working class. Riis was unable to comprehend that Victorian goods were genuinely significant to this “other half,” much less that they could mean many things to various citizens. Nevertheless, such goods were often one of the mechanisms marginalized consumers used to secure some small but significant foothold into consumer abundance.

Like many subsequent commentators, Riis apparently could not fathom how consumers might project personally significant symbolism onto apparently inconsequential things. He seemed unable to even wonder why marginalized consumers would seek out goods that were intended for vastly more lavish and ceremonial contexts than those in which they were eventually consumed. Thinkers like Thorstein Veblen who did directly confront these questions were prone to reduce it to “ emulation” of the powerful by the powerless. Yet what bric-a-brac suggests is that emulation is more complex than the instrumental copying of elite behavior with the assumption that such parroting will secure elite privilege. It is unlikely that many consumers were sufficiently naive to believe that their consumption of ceramic figurines or Victorian table settings would transform them into robber barons. Victorian consumption instead makes a
very powerful statement about the profound conviction many Americans have had in affluence, even when they were marginalized by that very society because of classism, patriarchy, racism, xenophobia, regional prejudices, and a host of other ideologies that always ensured that opportunity was not readily available to all Americans. Marxians have often reduced this apparent paradox to commodity fetishism, concluding that consumption is simply the masses’ way of unwittingly participating in their own oppression. There is indeed a genuine measure of oppression that is reproduced by consumption and its reproduction of wage labor. Yet it might just as well be argued that when consumers transform the meaning of mass-produced goods they are using those goods as vehicles of social critique as much as self-inflicted oppression.

The reality, of course, lies somewhere in between. For instance, just as the Linden Street redware Lincoln figure proclaims its Irish-American consumers’ ambitions to citizenship, it also reproduces an anti-black historical vision and risks ignoring the prejudices inflicted on Irish arrivals. These contradictions were already in public space, but objects like this figurine served to evoke the complexities of topics like riches, racism, and American identity that were difficult to otherwise articulate. For those scholars who hope objects will provide a clear reflection of 19th-century society’s most pressing social dilemmas, bric-a-brac instead provides a fragmentary, selective, and distorted reflection: rather than deliver a resounding symbolic resolution of profound social quandaries, bric-a-brac in most cases evoked generally inchoate and pleasant associations. Like most popular culture, bric-a-brac was a self-possessed reflection of American society that attempted to present back to consumers their deeply held preconceptions of themselves and others. While these West Oakland objects clearly could be understood to mean a wide range of things, they could not mean “anything”: for instance, there was an ambiguous but still restricted scope of symbolism that might convincingly be attached to Abraham Lincoln around 1880. The challenge is to identify what specific ambitions various consumers were most likely to connect to such symbols.

Bric-a-brac was, on one hand, an imaginative vehicle of personal and social ambition; yet, on the other hand, none of these desires were simply hatched from consumers’ imaginations, disconnected from dominant social structure. Bric-a-brac’s material forms were not provided by producers who were intent upon fomenting revolution through the sale of household curios. Instead, householders selected goods that symbolically “situated” the consumer within the world by appearing to secure the opportunities of consumer culture without threatening the social and ideological foundations upon which it stood. Because there was such a reasonably wide range of experiences of such ambition and ideology, it is not surprising that the meanings of household material culture would be so rich and complex.