

A Brief History of Interior Design

Unit

2

Unit 2

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Learning Outcomes:

On successful completion of this unit the student will be able to:

- ✓ Explore the historical perspectives of interior spaces,
- ✓ Describe ancient influences on interior design,
- ✓ Discuss ancient interiors as foundations for contemporary designs.

By looking at the development of style in a historical context, we can learn how past trends and traditions in interior design have brought about their look today. Architectural and interior design has come a long way from the classic carvings and columns of Egypt and Greece to the style of buildings that are our modern residences. The house styles reveal much about the economic state of the people, their aspirations, major scientific developments and even the movement of population.

Ancient Influences

The Egyptians gave us perhaps the first structured forms and the beginnings of elegance, both in the style of their places and how they dressed. But it was the Ancient Greeks who developed architecture into an art form. The building style of Greece and Rome has inspired countless styles of architecture and interior design all over the world. When the Greeks built the Parthenon in Athens they created a perfect balance of proportion and grace which has inspired the most elegant architecture ever since.

The Classical Tradition

The Greeks demonstrated how a building can be a harmonious work of art in its own right, rather than just a basic shelter, or a place of worship or trade. Important Greek structures such as temples were always considered in relation to landscape and were sited where they had plenty of surrounding space. The most famous example of Greek architecture is the Parthenon.

The Romans (500 B.C- A.D300) adopted Greek design traditions, but were the first to use brick and cement, which enabled buildings to be constructed with four or five floors, rather than the Greek one or two. Classical style flourished under the Romans.

Classicism in the Renaissance

Classical forms in architecture were largely abandoned during the Middle Ages, but were rediscovered during the Renaissance, which reached its architectural peak in sixteenth century Italy. From there it spread through the rest of Europe.

Gothic Style

Gothic architecture developed in Europe between the late twelfth century and the middle of the sixteenth century. This style began in France and developed throughout Europe. Gothic buildings, built principally in stone in various textures and colours, were illuminated by natural light flooding in through tiers of windows.

The Seventeenth Century

The main architectural movement of the seventeenth century was the Baroque, in which the classical forms of the Renaissance were used freely to create a marvellous style characterized by a liberal use of curves and extravagant decoration.

Italian Baroque

Baroque style used the classical orders for both construction and decorations but the approach was freewheeling with series of boldly linking floors, walls and ceilings, which gave interiors a feeling of vitality. Furnishings were now considered to be part of the rooms which included; chairs small tables and beds. The Baroque style piled decoration on decoration, which included paintings and sculptures.

France

The French developed their own variations of Baroque as a sophisticated and luxurious form of Classicism.

England

This style flourished even further in England, bringing in plaster work and wood carvings, and developing into the **'Tudor and Jacobean Style'**.

The Tudor design style developed in England during the late 1400's and remained throughout the early 1600's. Tudor dynasty rulers like Henry VIII and Elizabeth I influenced players in the surge for home design and décor.

During this time England began to construct homes with plaster walls. Dark half timbering and beams were also used in construction. Chimney tops were a new addition in Tudor design. The position of the fire place was removed from the centre of the main room and was shifted against the wall. This totally revolutionized the way in which houses were constructed. Before that the houses consisted of one single room in which most domestic functions took place. Two storey buildings were now erected, which allowed for additional rooms to be allocated for quite separate functions. The main elements of Tudor interior were wood panelling, and plaster ceiling panels. The furniture was heavy, very solid in construction and carved. More textiles appeared: carpets, upholstery and wall hangings became commonly used surface decorations.

Seventeenth Century Styling Ideas

Wood Panelling

Wood panelling was popular for interiors. Oak, chestnut or walnut were used in their natural form as well as painted in white, pale green or pale blue. Wool tapestries were used to decorate walls. In later years walls and ceilings were painted to imitate materials like marble and tortoise shells.

Floors

Floors were usually scrubbed wooden planks, covered with rush matting. Parquet flooring was also used in France and was covered with Persian, Turkish or Savonnerie carpet squares, while in Germany and Scandinavia the wooden floors were often covered with straw for protection. The main ground floor rooms of grand Dutch houses were usually paved with black and white marble tiles.

Windows

By 1640 sliding sash windows were used. Shutters took various forms; in the Netherlands the top of the window was left un-shuttered. Most of the windows did not have curtains at first, but towards the end of the century curtains were in use and were hung with rods. Curtain fabric often matched wall hangings and upholstery in the room.

Furniture

Oak was used for making furniture. Carved furniture was made in upright and rectangular shapes, although towards the end of the century walnut, often with marquetry inlay, became popular in grander homes. Tall Baroque chairs with barley or twist legs, carved tops and caned or velvet covered seats became popular.

Mirrors and candles

Small mirrors were usually hung in the rooms to create a feeling of light and space because large sheets of mirror glass were not made until late in the seventeenth century. Candle holders were used in many forms, including floor standing candelabras, wall scones and low hung chandeliers. Candle sticks were usually made from brass and were very popular towards the end of the period.

Re-creating the style

Wall

For wall treatment, oak panelling can be used with wool tapestries or damask wall hangings. Oriental wall papers, panels or screens can also be used.

Windows

Suitable fabrics for curtains include: printed Jacobean designs on heavy cottons and linens, 'flame stick' and bargello patterns in weave and prints, and faded colours for velvet and silks.

Floors

Parquet and other types of wooden floorings can be used, either in plain, or covered with Indian or Persian rugs. Alternatively, sand and seal existing wooden floor boards, covered with natural flooring, can be used. Black and white vinyl flooring can also be used.

Furniture

Original seventeenth century furniture is very expensive, but reproductions are available in plenty. Simple chairs with turned legs and rush seats, or tall chairs with caned backs and upholstered seats would be suitable for everyday use. Tables with planked tops and chunky legs, or extending draw leaf tables can be used. Use a fully upholstered arm chair in the bedroom with a four poster bed.

The Eighteenth Century Styles

The eighteenth century saw two important architectural movements: Rococo and Pallado. Rococo was characterized by its light elegance whereas Pallado was based on the work of sixteenth century Venetian architect, Pallado, and formed the basis for Georgian style.

Georgian Style

The English Georgian Age began with the accession of King George I to the throne in 1714. The years from 1720 to 1760 saw the introduction of many rectangular Palladian-style country houses. As with the interior styles of other ages, it was the development of materials and skills which greatly influenced the changes in the interior fashion. The early heavy designs gave way to more delicate styles. Considerable thought was given to the fireplaces and windows. The fireplaces were decorated with fine marble, mirrors and gilt mouldings.

Walls were a very important part of Georgian interior and much attention was paid to their treatment. Wall hangings of precious textiles were used. Costly wall papers in sheets rather than in rolls were frequently used. Exposed wooden floors are a typical Georgian feature. For the halls and grander areas of the house, stone or marble flooring was considered most appropriate. Close co-ordination in the soft furnishings used in a room was evident.

Mid-Eighteenth to Mid-Nineteenth Centuries

In England, Neoclassicism reached its peak in the interior design of Robert Adam (1728-1792) and the architecture of John Nash (1728-1835), London's most inspired town planner.

Neoclassicism

Neoclassicism was the first truly international style which developed and spread from France, England, Italy, Spain, Germany, Russia, Sweden and Denmark over to America.

Eighteenth Century France

A reaction against Rococo:

Neoclassicism started as a reaction to the Rococo style in France in the second half of the eighteenth century, resulting in a new popularity for rectilinear doors, windows, panelling and mirrors combined with column and friezes. Wreaths, ribbons, swags, and trophies became popular decorative motifs.

Eighteenth Century England

The Adam Style

The famous firm of the four Adam brothers worked in England in the second half of the eighteenth century. Robert became the most dominant and fashionable of the brothers. His style was light and elegant and embraced not only the proportions of a room but every aspect of its furniture and furnishings. He is best remembered for his fireplaces and panelled ceilings, delicately plastered and painted.

Regency England: Greek Revival

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, many architects began to look at the purity of Ancient Greece. The result was a plainer, more severe style of classical building with shorter, stockier columns. Walls were painted in clear pale colours topped by a narrow frieze, and low ceilings were introduced from which hung a chandelier. Furniture became more solid, with the emphasis on form.

Nineteenth Century France

The Empire style:

French interiors of the early nineteenth century reflected the victory of Emperor Napoleon. The classical influence remained strong: furniture was decorated with gilt and ormolu. Silk was used for curtains in sunny yellow, brilliant green, crimson or royal blue.

Nineteenth century Germany and Austria

In Germany and Austria, during the nineteenth century the middle classes retained a classical influence. Simple and comfortable furnishing was popular. Walnut or fruit-wood furniture, placed on parquet or varnished boards, and pictures in simple moulded frames were hung in rows. Wallpapers or fabrics in striped patterns were popular for walls. Pale curtains hung from brass rods.

Neoclassicism in America

Neoclassicism was popular in America in the 1820s and 1830s. Staircases became graceful, light and curved, with slender elegant rails, wooden panelling was replaced with painted, papered or fabric covered walls and plaster cornices.

Eighteenth Century Styling Ideas

Wood Panelling

Wood was popular for its attractive appearance and warmth. Usually plain pine was used painted in dark shades. Wall panelling was divided horizontally into three areas and often incorporated columns, cupboards and fireplaces.

Walls

Early English Georgian colours were strong and dark, although paler colours were used by Adam. Many Georgian town house walls had distemper backgrounds which were scrambled with oil paints to create a marble or grained effect. In grander houses fabric wall coverings were used in the early part of the century. Printed wall paper was also used in the late eighteenth century.

Windows

The rooms were lit by large sash windows. Fabrics for curtains ranged from silks and brocades to plainer cotton prints. Late in the century fabrics, upholstery and curtains were matched.

Floors

Parquet flooring was still popular in France. In England plain oak-boarded floors were popular but late in the eighteenth century fitted carpets were also in use.

Re-Creating the Style

Walls

When recreating the eighteenth century style, panelling effect for walls and ceilings can be created with applied mouldings or even wallpaper borders. Modern printed paper decorations can be pasted straight on the walls to create the effect of classical pillars and niches. You can simply divide the wall horizontally with a deep moulded wooden dado at chair height and add a deeper wall paper border at the top to create the frieze, and then fill in the spaces with broken colour paint effects such as dragging, sponging or rag-rolling. Dark paint colours such as greens, greys, browns and muddy olives can create an effect of the Georgian room very successfully.

Floors

Floors can range from bare boards to parquet flooring arranged in geometric patterns, or vinyl floor tiles resembling marble and stone effect. A large carpet square with painted or stained surrounding floor boards would also be suitable to create an effect of that period.

Windows

For Georgian style, hang a full length curtain from brass rods and rings. You can choose fabrics from damasks, velvets and coaster block printed cottons. Matching upholstery can also be introduced.

Lighting

Candles can be used with Georgian style candle-sticks made of silver, walnut or mahogany. Alternatively candelabra can be used in front of a mirror or on dining table.

Finishing Touches

Finishing touches can include large mirrors to reflect light and increase the apparent size of a room. Ideally these should have classical motifs on the frames.

The Nineteenth Century

The nineteenth century was the time of constant change in interior design. Queen Victoria built Osborne House on the Isle of Wight as a Tuscan villa, but chose a Scottish Baronial style for Balmoral Castle in Scotland; Napoleon III favoured Gothic for Pierrefonds.

Chinoiserie

Chinese art became very fashionable in interiors in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Design themes such as dragons and lotus flowers were used in wood carvings,

wall paper, furniture, textiles and porcelain. A great deal of merchandise was imported from the Far East.

Victorian Style

When Queen Victoria married Prince Albert in 1840 it was seen as a time of dramatic change in the style between the early and late 19th century. The Victorians craved innovation and novelty in design. The popularity of wall paper increased, although paint too was used for walls and ceilings. White was rarely used for ceilings; cream and drab colours were the preferred choice. Hardwood floors were still popular. Carpets were often bordered and most frequently laid in a square or rectangular. Marble and tiles were also popular.

Mahogany was a favourite wood for furniture. Curtains usually hung from brass or wooden poles, colours became richer and darker and fabrics heavier.

The Queen Anne Revival

Distinctive features of the Queen Anne style, popular in England from around 1860, were white painted sash windows, pretty balconies, moulded brick work and terracotta. This style also became popular in America in the 1870s.

Art Nouveau

The name from which the style became known came from a Paris shop which opened in 1895 and aimed to sell modern original merchandise. Art Nouveau spread throughout Europe. The refined British version of the Art Nouveau was distinguished for its elongated forms and pastel colours. The rooms were designed around grid patterns, dominated by slightly curving verticals and ending in stylized petal shapes, offset by occasional shallow curves. These patterns were also expressed in furniture, in surface decorations, in textiles and in metal fittings. Windows and doors were unframed and recessed into walls to emphasise the room's solidity and mass.

Nineteenth Century Styling Ideas

At the beginning of the century houses were decorated in light colours: bright yellow, green and scarlet were popular. Pale coloured curtains of linen or silk were used.

Flooring

For halls and porches the flooring mainly consisted of tiles. Patterned carpets were also used by the newly affluent middle classes.

Windows

Fabrics were reduced in bedrooms; however, new ideas of hygiene demanded free circulation of air. Un-curtained brass and iron bedsteads became popular.

Furniture

The Victorians perfected the art of producing comfortable furniture, concentrating on upholstered seats. Sofas and easy chairs were fully sprung and padded, with buttoning to hold filling in place. Rounded backs were curved to continue as arms.

Re-Creating the Style

Different styles were produced from this particular period. You need to decide whether to stick to a particular look, such as Empire, Regency, Victorian or Gothic revival, or to opt for a mix of styles with sympathetic themes.

Walls

In Regency style walls can carry friezes with classical motifs such as Empire style swags and baskets of fruit. For a Victorian look, a cornice in low plaster relief and a ceiling rose with a floral or leaf design would be more appropriate. A dado is optional, though there should ideally be a picture rail about three quarters of the height of the ceiling to break up the expanse of the wall. For the Victorian look you can use rich crimsons and browns. For an Edwardian feel use white and pastel shades.

Floors

Use tiled floors for hard wearing areas such as porches, hallways and kitchens. Authentic looking reproduction tiles are also available now. For other rooms wall to wall fitted carpets can be used. Victorian style bedrooms can be left uncarpeted.

Windows

For an authentic Victorian look curtains should be dark, fringed, tasselled or topped.

Accessories

Accessories can be used in plenty to create an authentic Victorian look. The multi-panelled folding screen was a Victorian notion which can still add charm to a room.

The Twentieth Century

Two hundred years ago, styles took decades to spread around but today broadcast media spreads fashions around the world in days. Since people cannot afford to change their furnishings and decoration every decade, styles inevitably overlap, often within the same house.

Art Deco Style

The glamorous style of Art Deco took its name from the Exposition des Art Decoratifs held in Paris in 1925, and became fashionable in Europe and America during the 1920s and 1930s. This new style was geometric. Circles, semi-circles, triangles, octagons and cubes were used as patterns on carpets, rugs, wallpapers, tiles, fabrics, as well as in shapes for tableware, furniture, and headboards, fireplaces and mirrors. Typical motifs featured sunrises, stylized trees and flowers, fans, fountains, animal forms, in particular, deer. This essentially exotic style was most suitable for luxury hotels, bars and restaurants, theatre and film sets. Chrome was used for all types of household furnishings and fixtures.

This style is famous for the introduction of the coffee table and the cocktail cabinet.

Not only this, Art Deco has much more to offer. Fitted furniture so essential to our modern lives, is a strong feature of Art Deco. The walls were usually painted in cream, beige and brown. Wall papers were less popular. However, linoleum flooring was popular. In the most formal areas of the house wall to wall carpeting was used. Curtains were generally of simple design and floor length

Although electricity was still considered a luxury by many, lighting was an important constituent of interior decoration in the 1920s and 1930s.

Global Style

The world is now a global village. Inspiration is all around us and the world is full of ideas. Any colours, schemes and patterns and styles can be adopted from different countries of the world. For instance think of the oriental carpets, the patterns of West African textiles, and the shapes of continental pots and you will get wonderful ideas to work on.

Materials, too, play a large part in ethnic decoration. Mixing items from different countries though seems strange but the colours, textures and patterns emerging from these remote places carry unexpected parallels.

American Colonial Style

American Colonial style was much influenced by Europe. The style made a shift towards the most popular fashions of Europe but were still presented in a uniquely American way. Wood was perhaps the most readily available material to the builders of the new world. This is evidenced by its generous use. Wood was used in the construction of houses, for making furniture and for fuel. The interior decoration of the houses also benefited from the availability of wood, it was also used in floors and walls. Furniture either arrived with the settlers from Europe or was made locally with the available wood. The finest pieces of furniture were made of mahogany (imported wood); walnut, chestnut, and cherry wood was also used for making furniture.

Chunky cupboards and chests, rush seated chairs, settles and rockers all fit into American Colonial style. The early settlers created their own patterned designs using stencils. Dense

flat paints are still available and can be used for furniture and woodwork to contrast with creamy walls, outlined with pretty stencils.

Oriental Style

In the eighteenth century, chinoiserie style was much in demand. With the opening up of trade routes styles were adopted from the rich cultures of the East. Trading through Europe and Asia brought not only exotic furnishings, but made people wealthy enough to buy them. Silks, lacquer work, porcelain items and fans, all suitable materials for interior decoration, were imported from the East, and were available for the wealthy people to add elegance to their homes.

The oriental style is simple; the colours used are those of nature. Furniture is hand crafted. Fabrics are dyed in a natural way and reflect the colours of earth and vegetation. For western adaptation of this design, use white and cream natural fabrics, with touches of black and scarlet, and green plants. Add beautiful screens, floor cushions and low tables with porcelain and rich red and black lacquer ware.

Minimalist

The Minimalist look is a legacy of the pre-war modern movement. It is internationally bare and free from clutter; “Less is more” said Minimalist architect Mies van der Rohe. Minimalist rooms are furnished with hard materials; wood, leather, stone, or man-made materials, such as linoleum, plastic and chrome steel. Surfaces such as carpets are avoided in favour of ceramic or vinyl tiles. Minimalist style favours colours like, white, cream, oat meal and grey. Curtains are replaced by slatted blinds. No clutter is seen in the room.

Twentieth Century Styling Ideas

Twentieth century interior design makes a distinction between “integrated” and “superimposed” design. Integrated” is related to architecture. Superimposed design is the work of the interior designer or the home owner. Here the interiors are flexible and easily altered with the use of wallpapers, fabrics and paints etc.

In the twentieth century, the room planning and everything in the room was now planned in accordance with technologies like television, computer, refrigerator, microwave, etc. Lighting, both artificial and modern, became an important way of adding atmosphere to the rooms while functional lighting was now a carefully controlled phenomenon. The twentieth century also discovered new materials for the home: plastic was now used everywhere from telephone and flooring to window frames. Synthetic fibres were used for carpets, curtains, beds and table linens. The natural look was in fact one of the most important design influences in the last decade of the twentieth century.

Modern Living

Recent statistics show that about 50 per cent of the housing stock in England was built more than fifty years ago and about 20 per cent was built in excess of hundred years ago. A hundred years ago houses were built of bricks; the internal space was divided into a fixed pattern of rooms. When compared with the houses of today it may seem that little has changed except our life styles. True there have been some advances. Instead of using open fires, we heat houses by filling our rooms with plumbing and we light our rooms with electricity. The kitchen is now located in the central area of the house and is more of a food processing room than a traditional kitchen. Separate dining and drawing rooms are becoming rare in our newly informal life styles. Instead, what is wanted is a large space where various activities can take place. Technological developments have made an office space a dire necessity in almost every house.

In the commercial world it has been realised that needs are continually evolving and a system of flexible walls has been devised for office use. Screens can be moved as requirements arise. With all these developments, to a certain extent the work of interior designers today is a distillation of ideas that are taken from past periods. Sometimes an individual idea is selected and extended; at other times period treatments, such as creating a room with a Victorian style, are followed closely, with only the necessary adjustments being made to suit the 20th century way of life.

Suggested Further Reading:

- ✓ *A History of Interior Design, (2005), By John Pile*
- ✓ *British Interior House Styles: An Easy Reference Guide,(2008), By Trevor Yorke*