

Victorian Furniture: Technology & Design by Clive D. Edwards. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1993. 209 pp., 33 ill. ISBN 0-7190-3783-2, \$18.95 (paper).

In *Victorian Furniture: Technology & Design*, Clive D. Edwards investigates the impact of innovative manufacturing techniques and materials upon nineteenth-century English and American furniture. He challenges the notion that these techniques and materials drove stylistic change, asserting that established traditions within the industry slowed its acceptance of innovation until the early twentieth century. Edwards mentions style only briefly, preferring to consider how furniture was made, from what it was produced, and who determined which innovations were appropriate for the mass market. Accordingly, he devotes much of his discussion to two groups of constituents – manufacturers and consumers – elucidating their respective attitudes towards novelty.

Focusing upon England, Edwards includes a brief chapter on furniture-making in the United States as contrast to his main discussion. Americans wholeheartedly “embraced new technology”(158), while the English perpetuated time-honoured practices, utilizing new machines, processes, and materials only if profitable. Edwards explains that the cost of acquiring machinery, reconfiguring a factory to accommodate it, or building a facility equipped with the latest technology prohibited all but the most successful English manufacturers from modifying established procedures. “Deliberate attempts to be at the ‘cutting edge’ of design and technology,” he indicates, “were not considered” (181). In the United States, however, manufacturers faced fewer obstacles, welcoming machines and processes that might enable them to cope with a pool of skilled labour too small to meet burgeoning consumer demands.

Edwards distinguishes his work from traditional art historical studies that base conclusions about the evolution of nineteenth-century furniture upon provenance and style. Similarly, he rejects the theory of “technological determinism” that has informed studies of the machine as the driving force behind conceptual, aesthetic, and technical developments leading to modernism. “Technology may be an integral part of change in design,” he concludes, “but it cannot be considered solely responsible” (171). He prefers the “momentum model,” which suggests that progress is essentially profit- and people-driven. Accordingly, he addresses the needs of consumers – who sought above all “high-style objects at the cheapest prices”--as distinguished from those of manufacturers, who wished to reduce costs or increase market share, harness the potential of labour-saving machinery, and achieve “novelty of design” to make their goods competitive (9).

As Edwards ponders “how technology and materials altered, improved, or otherwise changed furniture design and manufacture” (3), he does so within the context of socio-economic issues. Concerned with the worker as well as manufacturer and consumer, he dispels the notion that machines displaced humans as the Industrial Revolution progressed, concluding that the furniture industry depended primarily upon labourers who used machinery merely as tools to assist them in