

EXIT

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Interior Bowers: The Dormant Wilderness of Nineteenth-Century Boudoirs

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Abstract:

I know a rural bedroom with a paper representing a trellis and Noisette roses climbing over it; the carpet is shades of green without any pattern, and has only a narrow border of Noisette roses; the bouquets, powdered on the chintz, match, and outside the window a spreading bush of the same dear old-fashioned rose blooms three parts of the year. That is a bower indeed, as well as a bedroom (Barker, 1878, p. 11).

In Bedroom and Boudoir (1878) Lady Barker describes a number of bedrooms and boudoirs furnished with ornamental linings derived from the natural landscape. As the most private, internal and intimate interior spaces in the Victorian home, such spaces are likened to bowers - clearings in the forest, retreats or nests. Surrounded by surfaces composed of vegetal patterns and colours, the boudoir shows signs of reclaiming vestiges of the outside, not as the manicured garden or the cultivated landscape, but as foreign wilderness.

Barker's remarks critique the notion of the interior as tectonically distinct from the exterior. In contrast, the room is shown to be derivative of the exterior through its use of ornament, furnishings and linings.

This paper examines the relationship between boudoir and bower as established by Lady Barker. It then traces the physical description through theoretical positions of the time on the relation of ornament and nature, in order to position the boudoir as an interior space of decorative and tactile envelopment.

Keywords: interior, decoration, boudoir

Introduction

In the latter half of nineteenth century England there emerged a growing interest in the decorative 'artistic' interior. Period theory captured and reflected subtle shifts in aesthetic appreciation and ideological positions announced through advice manuals and social exchange. Some were driven by aesthetics, seeking to argue the body and its beauty at a time when 'masculine' culture tended to disdain and denigrate the sensual. Many British critics and writers such as Lady Barker (1878), Mrs Loftie (1876), Lucy Orrinsmith (1876),

Mrs. Haweis (1881) and the Misses Agnes and Rhoda Garrett (1876) exercised this new form of expression on architectural issues. They no longer followed the historical canons of architecture; instead they offered decorative advice and narrative descriptions of exemplary houses and fashionable abodes. Their advice manuals argued the merits of different approaches to furnishing, colouration and decorative effects. Many consisted of subjective observations more interested in the immediacy of space – its emotive and psychological effects on the body – rather than any subscription to traditional transcendent metaphors. It was a period when many upper and middle-class women were empowered to decorate and furnish their homes as a reflection of individuality and social status. However, despite this aim, current literature tends to focus on the Victorian interior as a site of entrapment conditioned by ‘separate spheres’ ideology, rather than a moment when women began to gain some control over their property.

These alternative perspectives on architectural space emerge at the same time that interior design as a professional design activity was wrestled from the auspices of the upholsterer. While advice manuals provided overall standards, room design, particularly decorative decisions, became a manifestation of personal taste. Decorating one’s home was added to a myriad of activities focused on ‘appearances’ such as dress, hair style and make-up as instruments for inscribing individual difference and freedom. Fashion began to challenge the canons and doctrines of taste and open the way for aesthetic individualism in the spirit of modernity (Lipovetsky, 1994). Under this conception rooms are presented as collections of space, objects and experience. Spatial qualities extend beyond the view; the formal apprehension of display and style accentuating a moment of interiority with full-surround experience. Heavily reliant on a combination of good hues and careful furnishing, these rooms are portrayed as seductive spaces deliberately orchestrated for affect. Behind this image is a reflection towards nature and its potential to conjure up the suppressed wilderness through the use of vegetal ornament and an immense accumulation of detail. Such spatial extension, from outside to inside, is nowhere more prominent than in Lady Barker’s boudoir, the interior bower.

From bower to boudoir

The links between ‘boudoir’ and ‘bower’ are well-established. Etymological enquiry reveals the ‘bower’ as a clearing in a wood or a landscape garden feature, a secluded place enclosed by foliage such as a rose-scented arbour, a gazebo, pergola, or alcove. In medieval times, the house acquired a room called a bower, a room reserved for the exclusive use of women, and a ‘precursor of the boudoir’. Furthermore, later citations describe the bower as ‘a

dwelling, an inner apartment, or a lady's apartment'. While the purpose and use of such rooms are various, this is the first evidence of a meaningful link between the bower of the landscape and the boudoir, the bower of the house. These definitions lead us to theorise the connections between interior space and natural landscape space.

Many theorists working across disciplines acknowledge the difficulty in trying to define Nature. Landscape theory on the matter establishes definitions relative to particular historical periods or a precisely claimed stance (Shepard, 1997). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to contribute to this cause, its development is particularly dependent on a certain framing of Nature, landscape and garden that assists a speculation on the vacillation of bower between inside and out. In this case Nature is a cosmic force or environmental agency (Bourassa, 1991, p. 21). In its most raw and primitive form it asserts itself as the wilderness, what Jackson (1980, p. 21) has described as wild, dark, un-tamed, un-known, uncharted, lawless and un-harnessed. Cultivated by the power of vision to apprehend and extend beyond immediate physical boundaries, concepts of what defines landscape include the appropriation and acculturation of everything within the framed view as familiar, owned or at least understood. The view forms the room. In addition, landscape's historical alliances with painting and pictorial space enunciate a distance between subject (viewer) and object (world). The picturesque landscape represents the epitome of efforts to control lands, plants, water, flora and fauna as a means of domination. Making landscape is a physical and metaphorical act of clearing away the wilderness to make it habitable. Closer to home, a garden represents a greater degree of cultivation, domestication and enclosure. It reaps the benefits of daily management, maintenance and manicure. Whereas the first pastoral gardens, essentially defensible areas for livestock and crops, were attributed masculine characteristics, the garden immediately adjacent to the house, particularly those dedicated to growing flowers, were the domain of women (Jackson, 1980, p. 21). The boundary of the garden, typically taking the form of a wall, fence or hedge keeps the territories of cultivation and wilderness from mixing. It marks the limits of the orderly and civilized and the chaotic and unwieldy. The wilderness is kept at bay from reassuming its former hold. Emerging as a subset of landscape, the garden and its interface with the spatial interior, offers a point of intersection between the house and the landscape at large. A primary intention of this essay is to explore the effect and residue of this exchange.

The issue of the painterly condition of picturesque landscapes of the time is significant to our inquiry, especially as Lady Barker does not describe the view of the world beyond as a picture or natural scene, but instead she acknowledges how the roses just outside the window are reflected in the interior decoration. In this case, Nature, masquerading as a garden, breaches

the interior wall and assumes a guise of designed artifice. Hunt states, 'the main concern of the picturesque was how to process the unmediated wild world, how to control it or make it palatable for consumption by sanitizing it with art' (Hunt, 1992, p. 288). Early landscape theorists conceive the picturesque as a tool for conceiving and exploring meaning within landscape design, in the same way as painting. They rejected landscape gardening as an pictorial medium only so much as it allowed their students to study formal properties of planning and the realities of light and shade (Hunt, 1992, p. 192).

Architectural and landscape theory has long flirted with sensory aesthetics. Experience, as a spatial event engaging all the senses, is concerned with material rather than form, and involves 'pleasurable experience that is essentially unmediated by any learned associations' (Bourassa, 1991, pp. 23–24). Because the body is not simply a viewer but a variable in spatial relations, formal constructs of subject and object become superfluous. Bourassa credits Edward Relph with the notion of existential insideness – the goal of immersing one's self in a spatial (landscape) experience (environment) 'without deliberate and selfconscious reflection' (p. 3). Evocative of phenomenology and resisting most forms of reproduction, landscape spatiality surrounds us in limitless ways which reconnect with Bachelard's reference to Nature as 'immediate immensity' (Corner, 2002, p. 146). In this way Corner affirms Shepard's statement that the wilderness is everywhere (Shepard, 1997, p. 9), when he writes of spatiality as a condition of material medium, 'a lived-upon topographical field, a highly situated network of relationships and associations...' (Corner, 2002, pp. 147–149).

Bower as amorous space

As a garden and private sanctuary formed by woven vegetal growth, the bower also references the nest construction and habits of the Australian and New Guinea Bowerbird (Figure 1). Unlike most other bird species where the female builds a nest for laying eggs and raising young, the male Bowerbird constructs a separate nest to facilitate the mating relationship. With a protective screen partition used as a de-stimulating device during courtship, Collaise & Collaise (1984, p. 82) suggest that this nesting behaviour and construction is similar to the human aesthetic sense. 'Bowerbirds decorate their courts and bowers with often highly coloured fruits and flowers, shiny objects such as insect exoskeletons, bits of glass or plastic, and a great variety of other materials – leaves, moss, feathers, lichens, stones, bones, snail shells, and bits of charcoal' (p. 79). These treasures frame the nest entrance and provide soft insulation, recalling Barker's description of the boudoir being 'snug as a bird's nest' (Barker, 1848, p. 42), and her recollections of 'lovely little nests of chintz and muslin, with roses inside and outside the wall, with low chairs and writing

table, sofa and toilet all in the same room – a bedroom and bower in one' (p. 33). Spatial enclosure of the boudoir as room and nest is one of protective privacy towards the goal of visual and sexual seduction.



Figure 1: Painting of Bowerbirds.
(von Frisch, 1974, p. 243)¹

The description and purpose of this space is reminiscent of the boudoir in Jean-Francois de Bastide's *La Petit Maison* (1879). In the preface to the 1996 edition, el-Khoury establishes that *petit maison* (little house) is not a reference to building size but a place for scandalous liaisons and sexual indulgence. Often referred to as '*folies*', these houses were initially concealed behind foliage to afford discretion. Merging an architectural treatise with an erotic novella, carnal delight is explicitly played out in the decorative, psychological and tactile affect on Méliete as she succumbs to Trémicour's seduction (Bastide, [1879] 1996, p. 22). Throughout the text, decorative motifs reflect their origins in the natural world despite their artifice, each time reinforcing the symbolic and spatial references between Nature, landscape, bower and boudoir. The dialogue between characters mimics territorial transgressions between the room of the orderly proper house and that of the untamed wilderness. In recalling the first boudoir encountered, Bastide draws from Le Camus de Mézières's 1780 description of the sleeping space as a grove; architecture as clearing:

The walls of the boudoir were covered with mirrors whose joinery was concealed by carefully sculpted, leafy tree trunks. The trees, arranged to give the illusion of a quincunx, were heavy with flowers and laden with chandeliers. The light from their many candles receded into the opposite mirrors, which had been purposely veiled with hanging gauze. So magical was this optical effect that the boudoir could have been mistaken for a natural wood, lit with the help of art ... Méliete could scarcely contain her delight (Bastide, [1780] 1996, pp. 75-78).

Just like the Bowerbird's cleverly constructed space of allure, Trémicour's cunning interior decoration establishes the boudoir as a room of illicit sexual liaisons also designed by a male, typically one's husband or lover, located within the overall domain of the house, yet situated in the margin between house and garden. In the words of Ed Lilley (1994, p. 193), the boudoir was a room for 'amorous dalliance' but at the same time it generated 'discourse about sexual power relations and was at the centre of discussions about morality'.

Bower as solitude space

Although the boudoir has licentious associations, it can also be understood as a place for female privacy. Lilley recognises it as a private room for retirement and sulking where women went to isolate themselves during periodic 'black moods' (Lilley, 1994, pp. 194–195, 197). Barker confirms this by declaring the boudoir to be 'a place to idle and sulk in' rather than somewhere to be busy and comfortable (Barker, 1878, p. 84). The boudoir may equally have emerged in response to a woman's need to claim a space of her own, to carry out her individual freedoms of expression. Whether or not this freedom was of the creative and decorous manner or that of the political suffrage sort is unclear – both are implied.

In either case, the gender-specific boudoir is an insular part of the house with physical and symbolic adjacencies to the garden and the natural landscape. Its inhabitant was known to write, read, and paint as a means of self-education. The mention of the boudoir having a bed may also suggest the accommodation of private sleeping quarters more for facilitating solitude than in the provision for sexual interludes. More importantly, such individualism propagated an awareness of one's inner self, that of interiority.

Once again, the parallel between garden and boudoir are vetted through prescriptions of the feminine and what is assumed to be the nature of women (Labbe, 1998, p. 66). Jacqueline Labbe recognises the garden as a similar state of enclosure to the interior room. Each house is a state of internal liberty in the guise of, or in spite of, the enclosure of domestication/ domesticity in the proper genteel manner; '[the] garden can also open up a less decorous

space structurally designed to subvert, obstruct, or transgress gentility' (p. 66). The boudoir's adjacency to the garden and its investment of ornament derived from nature may prove to be the way out (of entrapment), to the way in (of self-empowerment).

Spatial effect

Recall the description of the boudoir written by Lady Barker. In a few short sentences she highlights the role of chintz curtains, wallpaper, carpet and a bloom of roses beyond the window. And although the room is an extension of the landscape and the natural environment both its decorative motifs and its temporal provisions are constructed artefacts of artifice. The window, while not overtly prominent in Barker's text, is conceptually and spatially critical to our speculation. It operates as an experiential valve to limit and welcome Nature into the room. Citing a collection of material elements, Barker not only describes the room but alludes to its spatial experience as one of envelopment, what Olalquiaga (1999, p. 289) calls a cycle of extreme acculturation.

Lady Barker's reminiscences 'paint' a spatial and atmospheric sense of the room conditioned by the garden infiltrating the interior, not just through the visual aid of the window, but through mimesis of patterns, scents of flowers, healthy ventilating breezes, texture and vegetation colour. As such the spatial boudoir is revealed by the intersection of landscape and surface pattern. And having enveloped the interior in vegetal ornamentation, the window is not for picturesque viewing but is used to reflect exterior roses back into the interior. In this case Nature, in the appearance of a garden, envelops the interior wall and carpet in the guise of designed artifice.

In her description of the boudoir, Barker establishes a direct connection between the inside and outside. Noisette roses are the agent to a spatial reading that sees the room as an extension of landscape. It connects the female occupant to Nature in a more empowered manner than the traditional prejudicial assertion that equates women with Nature as a sign of weakness. That is, the room described by Barker breaks the traditional reading of interior architectural space as discrete rooms conforming to a greater architectural concern governed by, for example, proportion and style, or reason and consistency. Moreover it is unconcerned by psychological readings or questions of confinement, sulking or sexual encounter. There is the notion that the interior bower, the boudoir, is the place where wildness/wilderness reasserts itself despite and with the assistance of mechanised decorative artefacts – like the forest regaining its foothold. Landscape is utilised to create an interior environment rather than as a pictorial display. Le Camus de Mézières insists that the boudoir 'is regarded as

the abode of delight; here she seems to reflect on her designs and yield to her inclinations' (1996, p. 115).

Like many advice writers of the period Barker plays scant regard to the existing architecture, noting only doors and windows pertinent to her observation. The existing architecture is neither regarded as a structure/substrate for surface ornamentation, nor a proportioning system to be enhanced with decorative motifs. It is clearly disassociated from the physical and spatial system, and in this case is constructed in relation to the exterior landscape and from the emanation of interior expression. It is concerned with experience as a spatial event engaging all the senses.

What we note is that the decorative interior as part of a cultural phenomenon has a vital role in that it provides an aesthetic medium for the expression of ideas, desires and beliefs circulating in society. Interior furnishings and linings of the boudoir, because of their extreme individuation, are not tainted by the kind of thoughts and imagery that govern traditional canons of beauty and 'good taste'. They are the result of self-searching for individual self-expression; one reason why furnishings as a whole take on the quality of excess, or exhaustive overwhelming decoration. One can not immediately see any order; it is only when individual parts are closely observed that this act of envelopment begins to coalesce freely and unencumbered in a manner akin to the wilderness returning. Barker's boudoir, despite the many claims outlined in this paper, is the place where wildness establishes itself in an 'uncultivated' manner.

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Endnotes

- ¹ The authors have made several unsuccessful attempts to locate the copyright holders for the image. Original citation:

Plate 99. Bower of the orange-crested gardener in the rain forest of New Guinea. The two openings in front of the hut are connected inside by a semicircular passage. The bird has covered column between the two openings with dark moss. It is decorated on one side with blue iridescent beetles, in the middle with yellow flowers, and on the other side with broken shells. In front of the bower is a fence plaited from twigs and decorated with brightly colored fruits (sometimes with flowers as well), which forms boundary of the 'garden'. The male (left) has just rushed out of tunnel and greets the female by displaying his nuchal crest. (See von Frisch, 1974, p. 243.)

Credits

Credits on von Frisch p. 294 read:

'99. Painting of Bowerbirds by L. Binder, based on color photographs and descriptions of Heinz Sielmann, Munich. Photo: Dr. Max Renner, Munich'.