

Part 3 in a series

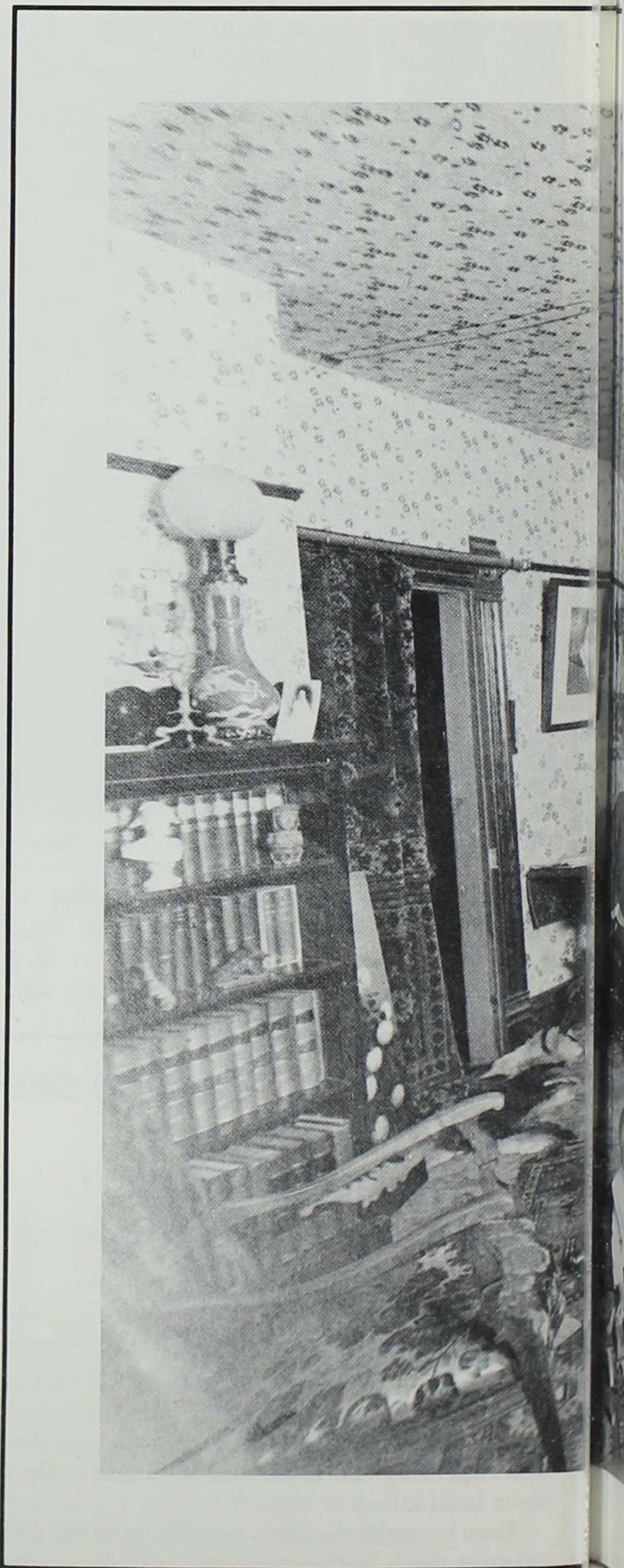
Interpreting the Image

How to Understand Historical Photographs

by Loren N. Horton

INTERPRETING A PHOTOGRAPH of an interior requires an eye for detail and often an understanding of the customs and attitudes of the time period. This image of a late Victorian (1880–1900) parlor of a middle-class family is a rich source of information about late Victorian furnishings. But perhaps more interesting are the anomalies — those elements of this image that do not seem to follow the customs and thereby suggest insights about the people in this unidentified photograph.

An understanding of the function of Victorian parlors will help us interpret the photograph. Certain elements are typical of such rooms; others present questions. To begin, one might list all the furnishings and features of the room. This method helps the viewer distinguish details and, in this case, demonstrates the abundance of objects in Victorian parlors. (From our 1990 point of view, Victorian parlors were over-furnished, but we must avoid allowing our own taste to interfere with judgments about what should and should not have been in the room.) The Victorian parlor was a special room that was not used often and probably only for formally receiving guests. It was not a room





COURTESY THE AUTHOR

in which to relax. Sitting rooms more often served the purpose of today's living room or family room.

Clues about the People

The woman seated in a chair beside a small table appears to be doing some sort of handwork, perhaps sewing. Women often sat in their parlors, doing handwork or expecting callers. Hence there is no real contradiction in this woman using the chair, the table, and the room for this apparent purpose.

The man seated at the elaborate piano on a bench or stool, however, raises questions. His pose is towards the camera, away from the piano. He is not even making a motion of playing the instrument. Women and children were supposed to demonstrate some proficiency in music and other artistic endeavors, but men were mostly supposed to make a living at some occupation that took them out of the house. If this were an artistic, musical, or literary household, we might suppose that other manifestations of such talent would be visible. No such artifacts appear that indicate creative production rather than decoration. The man is not really out of place in the photograph, but he does appear to be posing in a room that is not his usual habitat. He might more likely be in his smoking room.

Children were seldom allowed in Victorian parlors, unless they were brought in on special occasions to perform for guests or at holiday time to open presents. Here, however, one child is seated in a chair and another crawls on the rug. Perhaps a young girl would be seated in a small chair beside her mother's chair, to learn handwork skills from her role model. But even if we accept the notion that the older child might belong in the parlor on occasion for special purposes, it is much harder to accept the presence of the younger child in the room. Young children were usually confined to the nursery, where they were cared for by nursemaids (common to even middle-class families because of the availability of cheap immigrant labor). Note that the child's toys are scattered about on the rug. This is surely a condition that would have been unacceptable in any but the most casual Victorian household. We therefore

question the posing of this photograph, and why this room was chosen if the younger child and toys were to be included.

Even more unlikely is the presence of the dog. Although it provides a wonderful illustration of the difficulty of photographing animals in the days of long exposure time (we note that the dog moved and is blurred in the photograph), animals were not commonly allowed in parlors. No matter how fond the Victorians were of their pets, there were places and times for them, and the parlor was not one of these.

Clues about the Furnishings

Although the room furnishings are not solely functional, they are in accordance with the numerous etiquette guides and furnishing handbooks of the late Victorian period. The sculptures, framed photographs, prints, paintings, many pieces of furniture, vases, cushions, and shelves are all items expected in a middle-class home. The wallpaper is a bit unusual because the same pattern covers the walls, both below and above the picture rail, and the ceiling. Wallpaper was frequently used on these surfaces, but the same pattern was seldom repeated in all three places. Carpeting covered with additional rugs was common, though the mixture of these particular patterns was not recommended in most furnishing guides. This either indicates some individuality by the family or the availability of these rugs as convenient purchases.

In the right corner, the sofa, or arrangement of cushions, rugs, afghans, and animal skins, is of particular interest. Such arrangements were sometimes referred to as a "Turkish corners" or "cozy corners." Great dust catchers, they were not always created for people to actually sit upon. Sometimes they were used as a backdrop for *tableaux vivants*, in which Victorians would don costumes and strike classical or exotic poses for entertainment. The Turkish corner was basically a sort of artistic rendering that required yet more conspicuous consumption. A Victorian family with money spent it in ways that allowed the neighbors to know that they had money. Displaying an abundance of objects demonstrated to visitors that a family could afford such purchases. It is this charac-

teristic of the Victorian middle class that explains the period's flamboyant architectural extravaganzas, the enormous number of items used in furnishing rooms, and the elaborate fashions in clothing.

Assuming this room is indeed a parlor and intended for entertaining, there is a curious lack of chairs for visitors. Others may be behind the camera, but any ornate chairs would probably have been included in the photograph. Were straight chairs carried into the room when the lady of the house was "at home" (the term that meant she was receiving guests)? Most parlors had both comfortable chairs and uncomfortable chairs. Visitors were not necessarily expected to stay very long, and placement of uncomfortable straight chairs tended to hurry them along instead of allowing them to linger over tea. Etiquette books of the period, for instance, dictated that guests should not stay more than ten minutes during a "New Year's Day Call."

The woodwork on the two doors and two windows has the typical "bull's-eye" block at the top of each post, articulating the lintels. The posts and lintels appear to be fluted with machine planing, in a way that is very typical of the millwork readily available in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Portiere treatment of the door on the left is also typical, as are the curtains and drapes on the two windows. Picture rails were common, although this one is unusual in that it is level with the woodwork (rather than above) and continues across the chimney.

The bookcase on the left is an interesting feature. Many items are placed on the top, and the shelves serve double duty as "what not" shelves for small vases and busts. It must have been hard to get a book out, but perhaps the books were meant to be seen and not read. Because of the uniform book bindings, the books look suspiciously like the kind wealthy Victorians bought "by the yard" for decoration rather than for reading. Lighting in the room is not really ideal for reading or sewing. (Note the round-globe lamp on the bookcase. When lit, it would seem dangerously close to the wall-paper.)

The stovepipe hole in the chimney is covered with an elaborate feather or fern arrange-

ment and some sort of pendant. The covered hole suggests that the photograph was taken during the warm months of the year. If a stove was set up in the room in the colder seasons, then we might question the placement of the grand piano. The stovepipe would have passed directly over the lid of the grand piano. Grand pianos were costly. Would those who could have afforded one really have wanted the heat, soot, and danger of sparks and fire coming that close to such an expensive item?

Clues about the Lighting

The lighting fixture on the ceiling resembles a gas light, but there seem to be wires leading to it. Does this mean that the house was originally piped for gas and has since been converted to electricity? The type of fixture on the right wall appears in many catalogs of gas lighting fixtures in the latter nineteenth century. No wires are visible leading to it. Does this mean that both gas and electric lighting are used in the house at the same time? The two visible lamps could be of either variety, or use kerosene or other fuels.

Clues about the Photographer

Another curious aspect of this photograph is the angle at which the view is taken. How is this particular view and angle possible? And why? Why would a family want this view, which distorts the general impression and does not flatter either the furnishings or the people?

These thoughts lead us to wonder whether the intent (of the photographer or the subjects) was to have a photographic record of the people or to have a photographic record of the furnishings and decor. Photographs of furnished but unoccupied rooms are common in the late Victorian period, and reveal middle-class pride in conspicuous consumption. Including people somewhat lessens the importance of the furnishings, and this particular pose does not show off the people to their best advantage. The photographer's effort seems to have failed to do justice to either the room or the people.

But are we imposing our late-twentieth-century values and ideas on another time and