

Decorating the Dining-Room: Still-Life Chromolithographs and Domestic Ideology in Nineteenth-Century America

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I

On several occasions during the late 1860s, the novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe exhorted readers to adorn their homes with chromolithographs, color prints which reproduced original oil-paintings or, less often, depicted images created specifically for the print medium. In her 1869 domestic advice manual, *The American Woman's Home*, co-authored with her sister Catharine Beecher, Stowe described chromolithographs (or “chromos,” as they were commonly called) as essential components of a properly embellished home interior. In proposing a hypothetical budget devoted to parlor furnishings, the authors recommended that almost one-fourth of the total be allocated to lithographic reproductions of “really admirable pictures” by some of “America’s best artists.” Stowe’s advocacy of chromos also appeared in the promotional publications of L. Prang & Company, one of the country’s largest publishers of these images. The short-lived quarterly *Prang’s Chromo: A Journal of Popular Art* (published in five issues from January 1868 to April 1869) printed a letter in which Stowe thanked Louis Prang for sending her several free chromolithographs. After praising the “beautiful objects,” Stowe concluded her note with the kind of testimonial Prang no doubt had been seeking when he sent her the complimentary items: “Be assured I shall neglect no opportunity of proving my sympathy with your so charming and beautiful mission, and bringing it to everyone’s notice, so far as I can.”¹ And, though it is impossible to know what exact role Stowe’s

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¹ Catharine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home*, (Hartford: Stowe-Day Foundation, 1975), 90–94 (first published in 1869); and *Prang's*

promotions played in the overall sale of chromos, it is clear that she aligned herself with a hot commodity: from 1840 to 1900, chromolithographs in America sold by the millions.

The passages cited above suggest intriguing and previously unexplored connections among chromolithographs, mass-marketing techniques, women's prescriptive literature, and the discourse on home-interior decoration during the mid nineteenth century. Why did Harriet Beecher Stowe advocate chromolithography with such enthusiasm? To what extent, and in what ways, were promotions of chromos targeted specifically at female consumers? How did chromolithographs and the rhetoric that surrounded them contribute to what cultural historian Katherine Grier has called "domestic environmentalism" – an ideology that conflated moral guidance with the physical appearance of a house and its contents?² This essay will explore these questions by focusing on one particular category of print as it was defined by L. Prang & Company: the "dining room picture," a genre consisting largely of still-life images of fruit and flowers. The "dining room picture" was the only category in Prang's catalogue to be defined by its designated location within the home, associated with a specific domestic space and function. Both the iconography and the physical placement of still-life prints were connected to the "creatural life of the table" – the daily preparation, presentation, and consumption of food over which women tended to preside.³ Indeed, the textual and visual record of still-life chromolithography is an apt starting-point from which to explore the links between mass-reproduced art and domestic ideology in *post-bellum* America.

Many scholars have argued that ideologies of gender and domesticity cannot be understood apart from the economic formations with which they were entwined. Domestic ideology developed in tandem with the expansion of the market economy during the nineteenth century: as changes in industrial capitalism further separated commodity production from the household, "family" and "economy" emerged as distinct spheres which located women apart from the public realm of production and channeled men into work arenas increasingly susceptible to the

Chromo: A Journal of Popular Art, January 1868, 2. Stowe's reprinted letter was originally dated 20 Jan. 1867.

² Katherine Grier, *Culture & Comfort: People, Parlors and Upholstery 1850–1930* (Rochester, NY: The Strong Museum, 1988), 5–8.

³ I am borrowing this phrase from Norman Bryson's *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

vagaries of market conditions. Treatises such as *The American Woman's Home* were designed to promote the efficient management of income earned by men outside the home. Moreover, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has noted, “nineteenth-century manuals of domestic economy never questioned the predominance of capitalist social relations of production” and “actively sought to shape bourgeois culture.” In this essay I will consider domestic values in relation to the expansion of consumer capitalism and the development of middle-class culture in the early *post-bellum* period.⁴

More specifically, I hope to shed light on the ways in which still-life chromolithography (and the gender ideology implicit in it) accommodated the emergence and consolidation of an urban American middle class during a time of transition to an increasingly consumeristic society. Historian Stuart Blumin has argued that scholars have not paid enough attention to an important aspect of the nineteenth-century “domestic canon”: “the role of the specific *setting* of domestic relations, and of consumption and consumer goods, in shaping both the middle-class home and the reorganization of gender roles within it.” Blumin suggests that the family strategies by which Americans inculcated middle-class values in their children – the process of social reproduction described by Mary Ryan in her classic study *Cradle of the Middle Class* – also involved purposeful tactics of household consumption. Taking our cue from Blumin, we might ask how chromolithography worked to “shape the domestic environment in ways that signified social respectability, and that facilitated the acquisition of habits...that could set a family apart from both the rough [working-class] world of mechanics and the artificial world of fashion.”⁵ How might home furnishings in general and chromolithographs in particular have worked to reassure northern

⁴ Numerous scholars have developed these arguments. In particular, I have relied upon Gillian Brown, *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Stephanie Coontz, *The Social Origins of Private Life: A History of American Families, 1600–1900* (London: Verso, 1988); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “The Ideological Basis of Domestic Economy: The Representation of Women and Family in the Age of Expansion,” in Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 239–336; and Jeanne Boydson, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁵ Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 184–91; and Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790–1865*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

middle-class Americans of their place within a changing social order? What was the cultural work of still-life prints in relation to nineteenth-century class and gender ideology?

II

The first American chromolithograph was printed in 1840 by a Boston lithographer named William Sharp. During the 1840s and 50s, lithograph companies sprang up in cities such as Philadelphia, New York, and Cincinnati; by 1875, at least one firm could be found in most American cities. The engraver and printer Louis Prang, who emigrated to the United States from Germany in 1850, opened a print shop in Boston which soon became one of the country's most prosperous chromolithograph enterprises. The firm's first commercially successful chromo appeared in 1866, when Prang issued a reproduction of a painting by Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait titled "Group of Chickens." Over the course of two years, nearly thirty-thousand copies of this print were distributed, while Prang expanded his repertoire to include forty-six different images by 1868. The New York firm Currier & Ives, whose sales eventually surpassed those of competitors, also published a wide array of prints during the second half of the nineteenth century.⁶

Louis Prang worked tirelessly to promote the sale of his "American Chromos." Harriet Beecher Stowe was one of many personages from whom Prang sought reviews of his color prints; *Prang's Chromo*, boasting that it was "mailed free to any address," printed favorable comments from such artists and writers as Frederic Church, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Louisa May Alcott, and William Dean Howells. Alcott, for example, praised Prang for "cultivating a love of art by placing copies of good and great pictures within the reach of all." Church wrote that he would proudly add his name "to the copious list of artists who have promised to furnish works for publication."⁷ Yet other critics found chromolithographs distasteful. E. L. Godkin, editor of the *Nation*, argued that quality art could not be produced by the "mechanical contrivance" of the printing press. In his view, chromos were vulgar imitations, deceptive illusions, mere "merchandise." And, when the art critic Russell Sturgis received his free sample of prints, he responded to Prang with a message that did *not* make its way into the pages of Prang's serial: "I should not

⁶ The most comprehensive general history of chromolithography remains Peter Marzio's *The Democratic Art: Pictures for a 19th-Century America* (Boston, David Godine, 1979). See pp. 17–19, 59–63, 94–104.

⁷ *Prang's Chromo*, April 1868, 6; and Christmas 1868, 6. See also Marzio, 102–3.

be willing to hang up any American chromolithograph that I have seen...If people believe that these chromos are as good as original paintings...more harm will come of your labors than good.”⁸

Although Prang did not quote his detractors, he debated their ideas in the pages of his newsletter. And, in this effort, he explicitly enlisted Stowe’s editorial support. In the “Christmas 1868” edition of the *Chromo*, Prang included excerpts from an article published in the *Atlantic Almanac* in which Stowe defended chromos against the judgments of critics. Prang’s column, titled “Pictures for the Home,” portrays the “art critics” of “The New-York Tribune” and “New-York Nation” as pretentious aesthetes out of touch with the needs and desires of ordinary people. Referring to Stowe’s article, Prang commends Stowe for “bravely denying...that high-art pictures are suitable for the adornment of a home.” He quotes her opinion that “high art,” while valuable on its own terms, “is not suited to family life, but ought to be kept in museums and portfolios.” Taking Michelangelo’s “Last Judgment” and other paintings as examples, Stowe remarked:

“Michael Angelo’s Last Judgment,” where the Judge looks like a prize fighter in a passion, shaking his fist at his mother – such a sketch may have a certain value as “high art”...but we should earnestly recommend [one] not to frame it and hang it up for the terror of his wife and the bad dreams of his innocent babes... So neither should we think Schieffer’s picture of Fransesca di Rimini a proper thing to be forever talking to us from the walls of our parlors and bedrooms.⁹

Stowe’s vision of domestic life served as the foundation for an alternative school of art criticism; in her view, the home was a special place that demanded its own kind of art and decoration. Prang, for his part, was quick to deploy Stowe’s arguments – not simply as a means to refute his critics, but also as a strategy to maximize the appeal of his prints.

A key element of Stowe’s “pictures-for-the-home” philosophy (and one of great potential from Prang’s promotional point of view) was her belief that individuals should select home decorations reflecting their own personal tastes and feelings: “The great value of pictures for the home should be, after all, in their *sentiment*. They should express sincere ideas and tastes of the household, and not the tyrannical dicta of some art critic or neighbor... A respectable engraving, that truly is *felt* by the family as an artistic pleasure, is a better thing for them than a much higher one that they do not understand or care for” (original italics). According to Stowe,

⁸ Marzio, 105–6; 206–9.

⁹ *Prang’s Chromo*, “Pictures for the Home,” Christmas 1868, 6.

“higher” works of western art demanded sophisticated intellectual engagement and simply did not appeal to most Americans. Chromolithographs, on the other hand, were accessible to all:

There are certain humble walks of art in which excellence consists simply in a faithful and truthful representation of nature, in which the excellence is of a kind of which common people can become good judges. It takes very little artistic skill or sense to judge whether a stalk of blue gentian is faithfully painted, or the copy of a bunch of apple blossoms is true to the model of a great original. A host of such simple, inexpensive ornaments are given by Prang in his chromolithography.¹⁰

For Stowe, the values of chromolithographs lay in their status as “unpretending, unambitious, and always beautiful” domestic objects. In a word (as the title of Peter Marzio’s book makes clear), they were democratic – welcoming and inclusive of anyone able to appreciate the beauty of apple blossoms. Moreover, because they were so inexpensive, families of modest means could enjoy the “beauty and pleasure” of chromolithography, selecting their favorite images from among the many affordable, “tasteful” prints. Prang incorporated Stowe’s sentimental domestic ideology into a marketing strategy which articulated a vision of moral uplift for the masses while simultaneously making that vision available through the sale of mass-reproduced “home pictures.”

Before we turn to the prints themselves, a brief overview of the rhetoric of home decoration during the mid-nineteenth century is in order. In her study of Victorian American parlor furnishings, Katherine Grier explains that conventions of interior decoration ranged between two “poles of thought”: some commentators emphasized the home’s domesticity (or “comfort”), while others invoked its cosmopolitan character (or “culture”). According to Grier, “culture” signifies “the cultivated world view of educated, genteel and cosmopolitan people whose habits of consumption (including furnishing a gala parlor) were intended to create an expressive social demeanor.” “Comfort,” on the other hand, designates a pleasurable physical state as well as “the presence of ... family-centered, even religious values associated with ‘home,’ values emphasizing perfect sincerity and moderation in all things.” In contrast to the cosmopolitan view, proponents of “comfort” developed a “middle-class model of parlor furnishing modest in ambition and appropriate for thrifty consumers with middling incomes.” Their vision stressed moderation, family togetherness, and “homeyness” rather than formality and cultured sensibility.¹¹

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Grier, 1–5, 92–95.

As Grier points out, Stowe was one of the most outspoken advocates of the “comfortable” middle-class home. A few years before *The American Woman’s Home* was published, Stowe wrote a series of columns called *House and Home Papers* for the *Atlantic* beginning in 1864. In these episodes, under the pseudonym “Christopher Crowfield,” Stowe criticizes elaborate furnishings as symbols of fashion, and suggests that even innocent ambition could drain a family of money and happiness. The first story, titled “The Ravages of a Carpet,” portrays a family who redecorates their parlor to disastrous effect. Replacing their timeworn yet homey furnishings with a fancy new carpet, dark curtains, and a stylish sofa, the Crowfields turn their comfortable parlor into a dim, stuffy, and finally uninhabited room. Catharine Beecher no doubt applauded her sister’s didactic tale, for she had relayed a similar message in a treatise several years before. She claimed that true refinement “leads a woman to wish to have her house, furniture, and style of living... exactly conformed to *her means*, and *her situation*.” A woman “with good sense and good taste... will not attempt to show that she is genteel, and belongs to the aristocracy, by a display of profusion, by talking as if she was indifferent to the cost of things, by seeming ashamed to economise.”¹²

In the writings of Beecher and Stowe, properly embellished interiors function as material equivalents of a household’s moral state: domestic objects – depending on how they are purchased and used – can have either beneficent or detrimental effects on their owners. This ideology, which Grier calls “domestic environmentalism,” held that women could transmit moral influence to family members through material things. It also posited fashionable luxury as incompatible with true domesticity. Literary scholar Gillian Brown offers a brilliant reading of Stowe’s “furniture stories” which describes Stowe’s ideology as one of “sentimental possession.” In Stowe’s model of domestic consumerism, goods such as carpets or draperies are “transubstantiated” into personalized, sentimental possessions stripped of their market origins, distinguished from mere commodities by their domestic use and comfort. Objects, when placed in the “right” home environment, take on the virtuous qualities of their owners. According to Brown, Stowe’s fiction and didactic literature imagine a moral domestic economy purified of market relations and exchange values.¹³

Brown’s argument also sheds light on Stowe’s attitude toward chromolithography. Home furnishings, if they are to be domesticated into

¹² *Ibid.*, 5–8, 97–99.

¹³ Brown, 39–53.

sentimental possessions, must have sentimental *appeal* to their owners; they must be easily assimilated into the home's "homey" atmosphere. Expensive or "high" cultural artifacts, imbued as they are with exchange values in the market-places of luxury goods and art, are all the more difficult to domesticate. Yet chromolithographs, if chosen on the basis of emotional appeal and genuine appreciation, are more easily transformed into sentimental possessions. Indeed, Stowe's description of Prang's prints as "unpretending, unambitious, and always beautiful" domestic "ornaments" seems to dissolve their status as marketable commodities even before they are purchased (and indeed even while they are advertised as saleable merchandise.) But what was it about Prang's "overturned basket of bright red cherries" that Stowe found so appealing? How, exactly, did Stowe's enthusiasm for chromolithography fit into her project of constructing the domestic sphere as a space inviolate from the marketplace?

III

Given women's prescribed roles as co-ordinators of home decoration during the nineteenth century, it is not surprising that Prang and other lithographers targeted promotional messages at them. Eventually, magazine publishers began to capitalize on the association between chromolithography and female consumers, using color prints as free advertising premiums to attract new subscribers. Peter Marzio explains that women's periodicals made the most extensive use of chromos as promotional lures, with farm journals, religious sheets, and regional magazines following closely behind. Most likely, these other periodicals had high female readerships as well. And, tellingly, some writers who bemoaned the booming sale of chromos blamed women, not manufacturers, for their popularity. One critic, writing in 1883, wryly noted that "there appears to be a prejudice on the part of women, against leaving any considerable portion of the wall space uncovered."¹⁴

If the purchase of chromolithographs was figured largely as a woman's opportunity, still-life prints were especially linked to women's domestic roles. As mentioned above, images of fruit, desserts, and other food items were commonly referred to as "dining room pictures," displayed in the room where women's culinary labors culminated. Furthermore, still-life imagery depicts what Norman Bryson has called "the creatural life of the table": objects and artifacts of the household interior; the routine, small-

¹⁴ Marzio, 123–27.

scale, everyday acts of eating and drinking that take place within the (female) domestic domain. Of the writers whose testimonials were printed in *Prang's Chromo*, women made specific mention of still-life images more frequently than did men. (Quite possibly, Prang thought his dining-room pictures would appeal most to women and proffered his free samples accordingly.) And not least, still life was a common genre for women artists whose work was reproduced in chromolithographs. Bryson notes that, throughout its history in Europe, still life has been considered a genre appropriate for women painters to pursue.¹⁵ And so it was for American chromolithography: the artists Virginia Granbery (1831–1921), Frances Flora Bond Palmer, known as “Fanny,” (1812–76), and Lilly Martin Spencer (1822–1902) produced a large number of still lifes for Prang and Currier & Ives. Most Currier & Ives still lifes were not signed by the artist responsible, but in all but one case, where there is a signature on prints issued from 1862 to 1867, Fanny Palmer was the artist.¹⁶ Virginia Granbery, who pursued her career in New York City, painted many still lifes, some of which were reproduced as Prang’s “dining room chromos.”

If the promotional blurbs printed in *Prang's Chromo* are any indication, a color print by Virginia Granbery, simply titled “Cherries and Basket” was among the company’s most popular “fruit and flower pieces.” The Christmas 1868 edition of Prang’s serial printed a small black-and-white sketch of the lithograph, which depicts a round, shallow straw basket resting on the ground, nestled in a patch of long grass. At least two dozen cherries, many of which remain in bunches with their leaves still attached, are scattered in the basket and on the ground beside it. The “Cherries” print is similar to another chromo issued by Prang in 1869: “Currants,” also based on a painting by Granbery (see Figure 1). This picture depicts shiny, ripe clusters of scarlet red and pearly white currants, with some still

¹⁵ Bryson notes that critics and academic art institutions have regarded still life as the lowest form of artistic expression – below historical and allegorical painting, portraiture and landscapes, even genre and animal painting. Moreover, critics have traditionally viewed the “higher” genres of painting as demanding of “masculine” qualities of painterly skill and perception, while the “female” mode of vision – attuned as it was to “the sensuous detail and surfaces of the world, colour and texture” – rendered women more suited to the painting of small, sensuous objects at close range. The domestic realm of “low plane reality” encoded in still-life painting has been more materially accessible to women artists than the world of national history and “great” events which form the narrative subjects of “higher” genres. See Bryson, 174–79.

¹⁶ William Gerds, *American Still Life Painting* (New York: Praeger, 1971), 68. See also the biographical entry on Fanny Palmer in Charlotte Streifer Rubinstein, *American Women Artists* (New York: G. H. Hall, 1982).



Figure 1. “Currants.” Artist unknown. After a painting by Virginia Granbery. Printed by L. Prang and Company, Boston, 1869. Courtesy of the Hallmark Design Collections, Hallmark Cards, Inc.

attached to the green plant on which they grew. As in the “Cherries” print, the fruit remains outdoors in its “natural” setting, yet there is evidence of human involvement and activity. In the “Currants” image, a newspaper, instead of a basket, has been used to gather the edibles.

How did nineteenth-century viewers “read” these images? Fortunately, Prang’s correspondents provide a window into some of the ways in which Americans interpreted them. One common response focused on the chromolithograph’s verisimilitude. In a description following the small sketch of “Cherries and Basket,” Prang boasted that “this chromo is a perfect copy of the original painting, and shows fidelity to nature in gradations of color, form, and grouping.” As the writer Lucy Larcom opined, “‘The Cherries’...is very beautiful. The fruit is so deliciously real, it brings back the sunshine and breezes of early June; and one almost looks to see a robin’s head bobbing suddenly in at the corner of the picture to peck at the ‘black-hearts.’” Apparently, the penchant for ripe cherries among hungry birds was a common observation among New England elites, for Henry Ward Beecher – whom Prang identified as Stowe’s

“distinguished brother” – wrote: “‘The Cherries’ are so cleverly imitated, that I quite wonder that my painted robin, hanging near by, does not do as his living brethren do in summer with the cherry trees. I cannot conceive of a better substitute for oil paintings for those whose means will not permit large expenditures.” (Incidentally, Prang’s caption for another chromo, A. F. Tait’s “Group of Chickens,” bragged that the chickens were “as like nature that could be made, without the intervention of a hen” and described the image as “live chickens on paper.”¹⁷)

The above quotations suggest that the chromolithograph’s verisimilitude operated on two levels: first, it was a “perfect copy” of an oil-painting and hence *appeared to be one*; second, the cherries depicted look like *real* cherries, good enough to eat. These levels of perception (or better, levels of illusion) contradict one another, for one’s awareness that a print looks like a painting would implicitly include the recognition of the image as a culturally produced artifact – and consequently rule out the chance of perceiving actual fruit. Yet the above remarks suggest that viewers expected lithographed images of fruit to mirror both culture and nature at the same time. As we can see in the “Currants” lithograph, this expectation was sometimes thematized within the image itself: nature (the fruit) yields to culture (the newspaper), as if that were its destination.

Other writers, however, found the realism of Granbery’s cherries frustrating and even disturbing. Grace Greenwood called the cherries “delicious aggravations, luscious delusions” which tantalized the viewer but offered no tangible satisfaction. Even more disconcerting, in her view, was the fact that the cherries reminded her of Eve’s temptation in the Garden of Eden:

In this particular chromo, however beautiful and perfect as it is, I have one objection – it is a fruit piece; and I don’t like them. By fruit, the first woman fell. It was the fruity flavor about original sin that made it so powerfully tempting... These cherries, so glowing, so golden, painted with a sort of dainty *diablerie* of realism, – tangible, yet unattainable as the apples of the Hesperides... suggest the torture of Tantalus, but paradoxically; for they certainly put water enough in one’s mouth.

The woman whose blurb followed Greenwood’s invoked the same biblical story, although she did not share Greenwood’s displeasure: Alice Cary wrote that “the fruit is fresh and beautiful, as if just from the tree; and if our ancient mother was tempted, as I am by this delicious cluster, I, for one, do not in the least blame her that she did pluck and eat.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Prang’s *Chromo*, April 1868, 6; Christmas 1868, 5.

¹⁸ Prang’s *Chromo*, April 1868, 6.

Prang, no doubt, took Greenwood's discomfort as an underhanded compliment about the print's verisimilitude; clearly, in printing her letter, he did not worry that allusions to Original Sin on the part of some women viewers would impede the sale of his wares. Although we cannot know the extent to which Greenwood's contemporaries shared her reading of the print as a reminder of Adam and Eve's fall, her comments do suggest one emblematic way of interpreting "realistic" depictions of fruit, especially on the part of women.

In invoking Original Sin, both Greenwood and Cary suggest that the consumption of food in general, and fruit in particular, was a problematic issue for them. While Cary posits the sensual appearance of the fruit as an excuse for Eve's (and perhaps her own) transgressions of appetite and desire, Greenwood sees the print as a painful reminder of womankind's first overindulgence, and a threat to what must have been her own project of bodily restraint. The metaphorical association of fruit with sexuality has persisted throughout western culture, not least because fruits are the products of sexual union and fertilization among plants, as well as the carriers of seeds for future reproduction. The dominant sexual ideology of Victorian America, which expected women to dampen men's sexual passions through their own innate female "passionlessness," has been well documented by historians.¹⁹ In a culture that posited hunger for food as a metaphor for erotic appetites, images of succulent fruit could very easily have threatened women whose identities were bound up with imperatives of sexual restraint. In her perceptive analysis of the relationships among food, sexuality, and desire, cultural critic Susan Bordo explains that prohibitions against women's overeating were characteristic of Victorian gender codes. *Godey's Lady's Book* cautioned readers not to load their plates with food, while conduct manuals advised women to consume as little as possible. One book of 1880 warned that "every luxurious table is a scene of temptation, which requires fixed principles and an enlightened mind to withstand." Employing sexual metaphors to describe the potential transgression prompted by the "luxurious table," the manual continued: "Nothing can be more seducing

¹⁹ The material culture scholar Kenneth Ames discusses the sexual symbolism of fruit in dining-room iconography. See *Death in the Dining Room and Other Tales of Victorian Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 60. On middle-class sexual ideology in nineteenth century see Nancy F. Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850," in Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth H. Pleck, eds. *A Heritage of Her Own* (New York: Touchstone, 1979); John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 57, 70-71.

to the appetite than this arrangement of the viands which compose a feast.”²⁰

Most interesting for our purposes is the fact that Stowe herself was a proponent of restrained eating. In *The American Woman's Home*, following their advice on home decoration, Beecher and Stowe devoted a chapter to “healthful food.” From the outset, the authors establish that “the person who decides what shall be the food and drink of a family, and the modes of its preparation, is the one who decides, to a greater or lesser extent, what shall be the health of that family.” The gravest threat to a family's health, they explain, is “intemperance in eating.” In their view, the “great variety of food” and “the customs of society” cause people to eat beyond the point of physical hunger, a practice that results in a host of physiological problems and illnesses. Therefore, they reason, “it becomes the duty of every woman, who has the responsibility of providing food for a family, to avoid a variety of tempting dishes.” But, although husbands and children are included in their regimen, Beecher and Stowe target women as most in need of lessons in gastronomic self-control:

Those persons who keep their bodies in a state of health by sufficient exercise can always be guided by the calls of hunger... But the difficulty is, that a large part of the community, *especially women*, are so inactive in their habits that they seldom feel the calls of hunger. They habitually eat, merely to gratify the palate... They are not called to eat by hunger, nor admonished, by its cessation, to stop... It is probable that three-fourths of women in the wealthier circles sit down to each meal without any feeling of hunger, and eat merely on account of the gratification thus afforded them. (My italics)

For readers wondering how to change their eating habits, the advisors recommended eating “only one or two articles of simple food” in quantities “less than the appetite demands” for two days, so as to train themselves to eat “just enough to satisfy the appetite” in the future. Clearly, cultural definitions of appetite as a force to be suppressed, of food as a potential danger to be contained, are not inventions of the late twentieth century. (Nor, as Bordo also suggests, are representations of women as preparers of food which *others* are encouraged to consume with relish.²¹) Perhaps, then, visual representations of food – including images of cherries or currants – functioned as substitutes or displacements for the

²⁰ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 110–14.

²¹ Ibid. Also, historian Harvey Levenstein, in his study of the American diet in the late nineteenth century, discusses the fact that women were expected to be daintier eaters than men. See his *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 12–13.

actual food which women were admonished not to overconsume. People who experience profound hunger have been known to read about or gaze at images of food as a way to compensate psychologically for their lack of real sustenance.²² What is interesting about nineteenth-century chromos, however, is that they were sold to women whose economic ability to feed themselves and their families was assured. Indeed, the cultural “problem” of overeating is a problem only in societies of relative abundance, where food is easily obtained.

Greenwood’s rebuke of “The Cherries” and nineteenth-century lessons in appetite control thus need to be seen as class-specific phenomena. Although Beecher and Stowe suggested that “women in the wealthier circles” had the most trouble limiting their food intake, their book was targeted at a larger, broadly middle-class audience of women whose economic means covered basic material needs yet allowed for non-essential purchases such as chromolithographs. Indeed, Victorian domestic ideology was intended to influence households of both affluent and modest means; what united the women of Stowe’s prescriptive domain was their purported relationship to the market. Susan Bordo has pointed out that Victorian restrictions of women’s eating reveal the class dimension of gender ideology: “In the reigning body symbolism of the day, a frail frame and a lack of appetite signified not only spiritual transcendence of the desires of the flesh but *social* transcendence of the laboring, striving ‘economic’ body.” A women’s dainty appetite, her restrained consumption of the goods made available by her husband’s labors, signified her own removal from the demanding public sphere.²³

IV

Yet however lush and succulent Granbery’s cherries appeared to viewers, still-life chromolithographs tended *not* to depict scenes of lavish abundance or opulence. The 1850s through the 70s witnessed a resurgence of interest

²² The film *King of the Hill*, released in 1993 and directed by Steven Soderbergh, tells the story of an American boy growing up during the Great Depression. Abandoned by his parents and left with little money, the boy resorts to eating plain rolls for dinner. One poignant scene shows him cutting out magazine photographs of hearty fare, arranging them on an empty dinner plate, and “eating” them with a fork and knife. Interestingly, Grace Greenwood’s comment in *Prang’s Chromo* offers a similar tale: after her remarks about Original Sin, she tells of “a poor young friend in the army during the war, who after rations of hard tack and salt pork, or after no rations at all, used to mournfully regale himself by reading sumptuous bills of fare out of Soyer’s ‘Cook-book.’” She then notes that “Prang’s ‘cherries’ would have furnished an admirable dessert for one of those airy repasts.”

²³ Bordo, 117.



Figure 2. Paul Lacroix. “Nature’s Bounty,” n.d. Oil on canvas, 46 × 56 inches. From the collection of the New Britain Museum of American Art, Connecticut, Alix W. Stanley Foundation Fund. Photo credit: E. Irving Blomstrann.

in still life among American artists, who – after a relative quiescence of still-life painting during the 1830s and 40s – began to extend the tradition developed by Raphaelle Peale and other artists of the Peale family. One such painter was Severin Roesen, who lived in the United States, mostly in Pennsylvania, from 1848 to 1871. In 1857, Roesen completed a painting which depicts a table brimming with fresh grapes, pears, watermelon, oranges, apples, and berries. At the top of the figure is a large basket filled with peaches, while a glass of wine and a pedestal bowl of raspberries mirror one another in their forms. Oranges and melons at the bottom of the image have been peeled, broken open or cut into slices. The fruits appear to be at the peak of ripeness; no bruises or scratches mar their surfaces. The artist Paul Lacroix painted a similar composition, “Nature’s Bounty,” sometime around 1860 (see Figure 2).²⁴ In this painting, two tiers of marble surfaces are laden with fruits: bunches of grapes cascade over the table, peaches are gathered in a basket, and a single champagne flute picks up the shape of the open bottle from which

²⁴ Gerdts, 59–79.



Figure 3. Frances Flora Bond Palmer. “Garden, Orchard and Vine.” Printed by Currier & Ives, 1867. Photograph courtesy of The Old Print Shop, New York, NY.

the beverage was poured. In the painting, almost every inch of surface is covered with fruit, suggesting a cornucopia of natural bounty assembled for human pleasure and indulgence.

Compared to these oil-paintings, Prang’s images of currants and cherries seem meager indeed. We might compare the works of Roesen and Lacroix – which to my knowledge were not reproduced as chromolithographs – to a popular still-life print distributed by Currier & Ives (see Figure 3). Fanny Palmer’s “Garden, Orchard, and Vine,” published in 1867, features many of the same fruits depicted in the oil paintings: peaches, grapes, melon, and even a pineapple – no doubt an exotic edible in the American northeast at the time. And, like the Lacroix painting, Palmer’s lithograph depicts the leaves and tendrils of the grapevine, suggesting the grapes’ connection to nature. Yet the plain wooden table or board (already a contrast to the paintings’ thick marble slabs) is not overflowing with fruit – while a fly perched on the center of the surface hints at potential decay and suggests that all is not perfect for human



Figure 4. John F. Francis (1810–1885). “Still Life, Grapes in Dish,” *ca.* 1850. Oil on canvas, 25 × 30 inches. Collection of The Newark Museum.

consumption. Although Palmer’s print renders a display of ample plenty, it lacks the sense of opulence and overabundance that characterizes Roesen’s and Lacroix’s visual feasts.

This point can be pressed further by comparing still-life compositions of a different kind: the luncheon or dessert piece, which depicts food items, beverages, and tableware arranged carefully on a table. One accomplished American painter of such images during this period was John Francis (1808–86), another Pennsylvanian. His painting of 1872, titled “The Dessert,” showcases a variety of ornate porcelain artifacts, including a gold-trimmed sugar bowl, a scalloped fruit bowl, an elegant cake plate, and four small serving bowls. Bright red raspberries fill the large bowl, cookies and jelly rolls rest upon the cake-pedestal, and a graceful glass pitcher holds an ample amount of fresh cream. Although Francis devoted more painterly attention to the table’s artifacts than to the food itself, he nonetheless stresses that the buffet has been assembled for eating; the silverware and china are clearly in the service of an enticing



Figure 5. “Dessert # 6.” Artist unknown. After a painting by Carducius Plantagenet Ream. Printed by L. Prang and Company, Boston, *ca.* 1871–1875.

selection of sweets. In another still life by Francis, “Still Life, Grapes in Dish,” a pedestal fruit bowl holds an array of walnuts, grapes, and other fruits, while almonds and oyster crackers are strewn amidst two wine bottles, a porcelain jug and glass of water, and several champagne flutes and wine goblets. A thick wedge of cheese in the center of the painting further emphasizes the rich substance of the luncheon fare offered (see Figure 4).

How do Prang’s renditions of this genre compare? One example, issued sometime between 1871 and 1875, is titled “Dessert # 6,” suggesting its place in a series of similar chromos (see Figure 5). Although it is referred to as a dessert still life, it seems more akin to Francis’ luncheon piece – but, in any case, it is clear that the print registers a level and style of consumption “lower” than the one depicted in either of the Francis paintings. One uncorked bottle of extra dry wine, flanked by two wine glasses, rests on the center of a marble table. The only other implement is a plain butter knife, which divides the composition diagonally, with several small bunches of white and purple grapes on either side. The table

appears to be set for two, yet there is only one orange, one apple, one walnut. There are no elegant serving pieces, no rich cakes or cheeses – and, perhaps most significantly, the single apple is overripe, bruised, and spotted, rendered in a brownish-gold color. This is a modest dessert displayed in a tastefully furnished, yet somewhat Spartan, interior.

I compare chromolithographs to contemporaneous oil-paintings in order to illustrate the culturally available images that were *not* chosen by lithographers as subjects for their “democratic art” – and to suggest that what *did* get depicted in the print medium was chosen deliberately from a range of possible styles. Perhaps the modest nature of the chromos reflected the financial means of lower middle-class audiences, while the abundance depicted in oil-paintings kept pace with the values and tastes of affluent customers who could afford original works of art. Moreover, given what we know of Stowe’s attitudes toward the consumption of both domestic furnishings and food, it is probable that she would not have endorsed reproductions of Francis’s or Lacroix’s paintings so enthusiastically, if at all. Bryson notes that still-life paintings, especially those of cultures in which surpluses of wealth are directed toward the adornment of domestic interiors, encode the “life of the table” through a visual discourse which interprets abundance through the categories of morality. “Still life forms a range of options; in all its regions, affluence is ethically keyed,” he explains.²⁵ The relatively modest displays featured in chromolithographs were perfectly suited to Stowe’s vision of domestic environmentalism and its moral imperatives of moderation and comfort. The iconography of still-life prints registered a code of ethics regarding personal consumption, a code in which food (and the objects used for its consumption) served to symbolize a whole range of commodities available for purchase.

Indeed, the issue of moral consumerism seemed pressing to many arbiters of domestic ideology during the 1860s and 70s. To mention just one other example, Beecher and Stowe’s program of restrained consumption was also fostered by the publication of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* in 1869. Alcott’s didactic domestic novel for girls – which can be read as a series of lessons designed to train young women in self-sacrifice and domestic cooperation – indulged readers with descriptions of elegant fashions and fancy homes, yet exhorted them to curb their material desires within certain boundaries. Each of the four March sisters develops her own attitudes toward the ownership of goods; together, they embody

²⁵ Bryson, 98, 121, 132.

a “philosophy” of virtuous consumption that carves out a middle ground between the cosmopolitan world of fashion and the “lower” world of material deprivation. In this regard, Alcott’s fiction and Stowe’s promotion of chromolithography performed similar cultural work. (Not surprisingly, as we may remember, Alcott was among the New England writers who endorsed chromolithography in Prang’s newsletter.)

Yet, why did affluence and domestic consumption provoke such anxiety at this time? Though historians have emphasized the period from 1880 to 1930 as most significant in the development of modern American consumer culture, others have acknowledged important changes during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Mary Ryan found that mid-century households in Utica, New York were “vitaly connected with the advances of both the marketplace and the factories” and served as “the targeted destination for a voluminous flow of consumer goods.” As Elaine Abelson has observed, “in the very middle decades of the nineteenth century, when the privatized middle class seemed to have reached its apotheosis, the pull of consumer capitalism provided a dialectic that never found satisfactory resolution.” As the middle-class household became increasingly dependent on industrially produced goods and services, the purchase and ownership of objects grew more central to the formation of middle-class identity. Although the older American culture of self-denial had always existed in opposition to the appeal of worldly things, the expanding availability of commodified goods in the *post-bellum* decades widened the gulf between the fashionable and the frugal.²⁶ To put it simply, Americans were investing more and more resources in material things during this period – making it harder to distinguish between the “comfortable” and “cosmopolitan” forms of domesticity. Still-life prints, then, may have served as emblematic reminders of material restraint during a time when commodities, like ripe fruit, were all the more tempting.

Yet the status of the chromolithograph as a conservative symbol of self-denial and anti-consumerist values was itself a paradox. The nineteenth-century’s most “popular” art was also a commercial art – designed, advertised, and sold as a commodity with a specific market value. Indeed, soon after its development in the United States, chromolithographic technology was frequently used in advertising; all major chromo companies relied on the production of client-based print advertisements

²⁶ Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, 198–200; and Elaine S. Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 27–33.

for much of their income.²⁷ Moreover, the contradictory status of chromolithographs as both market commodities *and* emblems of suppressed market desires mirrored the central paradox of the domestic space in which they were displayed: just as gender ideology constructed the middle-class home as a haven from the market, it also targeted the home as the receptacle for many of the goods exchanged there. Furthermore, as Stowe's advice manual indicates, the purchase and management of those goods was commonly defined as women's work. Thus, although women were represented as removed from the economic sphere of production, they were increasingly brought into that sphere as consumers. As Gillian Brown has suggested, Stowe's ideology of sentimental possession, through purifying commodities of their exchange values, functioned as a strategy to reconcile this ironic disjunction. In conclusion, I will explore how the iconography of still-life prints attempted to "cope" with this paradox.

V

In cultural tensions between the values of an older, agrarian, producer-oriented society and the imperatives of an emerging consumer economy, representations of the natural world played an important role. Among earlier transcendentalist critiques of material acquisition, Emerson rhetorically warned that "things are in the saddle and ride mankind," while Thoreau actually relinquished his property and enacted a life free from commercial relations in the wilderness near Walden pond. Though quite different from Thoreau's depiction of his wooded surroundings, still-life chromolithographs also invoked nature as a trope for an earlier world of household-based production. As I have mentioned, the fruits depicted in mass-produced prints often maintain a connection to their natural growing environment: Granbery's cherries and currants are still outside, as if just picked from the tree; Palmer's grapes reveal the leaves and tendrils of their vines. Such images depict fruit not as a commodity bought and sold at a market, but as a bountiful gift from the earth made possible through human effort and co-operation with nature.

This theme is perhaps most evident in Fanny Palmer's lithograph "Landscape, Fruit and Flowers," first issued by Currier & Ives in 1862 and eventually included in the firm's publicized list of its "Best Fifty" prints (see Figure 6). In this image, a parapet separates an outdoor porch or balcony from a background landscape of sky, trees, hills, and water. On

²⁷ Marzio, 191–92.



Figure 6. Frances Flora Bond Palmer. “Landscape, Fruit and Flowers.” Printed by Currier & Ives, 1862. Photograph courtesy of The Old Print Shop, New York, NY.

the plane in front of the parapet – which is marked off as a middle space between a domestic interior and the natural outdoors – stands a circular wooden table, on which rests a vase of flowers, a shallow bowl of strawberries, a basket of large blackberries, a melon, and several bunches of grapes. The table has been arranged, presumably by a woman, in a way that collects and displays the “gifts” of nature for the benefit of those residing in (or perhaps visiting) the house indoors. But, while nature’s produce has been removed from its botanical environment and repackaged for human use, it rests in front of the nostalgically idealized landscape which gave rise to it. A bird, free to fly where it may, links the porch and the table to the landscape beyond. A farmhouse and field in the remote background suggest the original point of the fruit’s production – a place imagined as attuned to the rhythms of nature rather than the demands of the factory or market-place. In this image, nature functions as a symbol for an innocent, stable, agrarian, and production-based social order – one increasingly threatened by the expanding cities and factories of the urban

North in the 1860s.²⁸ Thus, I would argue, Palmer's image not only encodes the life of the table through a vision of moral consumption, it also connects the domestic interior to a naturalized realm of production free from economic exchange relations. Since still lifes must in some way link the home to the goods consumed within the home's domain, better to link it to a natural producer culture than to the ever-expanding sphere of industrial consumer capitalism.

But, as true components of Victorian domestic ideology, chromolithographs worked to *mask* the home's connection to the world of commercial exchange rather than establish any real opposition to it. The imagery of still-life chromos may have celebrated a nostalgic vision of an older producer culture governed by the work-ethic, self-denial, and the cycles of nature – but their status as mass-produced posters demanded their participation in the consumer-oriented institutions of advertising, marketing, and sales. By forging a moralized middle ground of domestic and personal consumption, writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe actually facilitated the process by which Americans adjusted to the social and economic changes they were facing. The definition of chromolithography as a “democratic” art accessible to all attempted to bring the majority of Americans under the sway of bourgeois culture and its project of edification for the masses. As elements in the discourses of interior decoration and women's roles in the 1860s and 70s, chromolithographs embodied the paradoxical status of the privatized domestic “havens” in which they were displayed. Nineteenth-century still-life prints emblematically encoded a value system that accommodated middle-class Americans to an emerging capitalist order; in this sense, they mirrored the domestic ideology with which they were so readily affiliated.

At the same time, while still-life chromolithographs worked to smooth and accommodate the northern middle-classes' transition to an increasingly consumeristic society, they symbolically enacted a vision of an alternative, feminized culture that depended on an ideological separation from the male-driven market-place. For, if prints such as Fanny Palmer's “Landscape, Fruit and Flowers” reassured *post-bellum* Americans that the values of the pre-commercialized, pastoral past were alive and well, they located those values squarely in women's domestic sphere. Still-life images – so frequently painted, promoted, and purchased by women – implicitly

²⁸ For an account of how the myth of a simple agrarian past took shape and functioned in *post-bellum* American visual culture, see Sarah Burns, *Pastoral Inventions: Rural Life in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

celebrated women's household and culinary roles and imagined a moral domestic economy free from the demands of the patriarchal, commercial world. By encoding the "creatural life of the table" through an iconography that masked yet facilitated the increasing commodification of the home and goods consumed within it, still-life prints reassured women that they could enjoy the comforts of an emerging consumer culture while avoiding its corruptions. The ideal of sentimental possession, which imbued material things with the virtuous qualities of their female owners, also worked the other way around – allowing women to identify with the "unpretending, unambitious and always beautiful" pictures that adorned their dining-room walls.