CHAPTER TWO

Goods and Surfaces

We are surrounded by emptiness, but it is an emptiness filled with signs.
—HENRI LEPERS, Everyday Life in the Modern World

SKINNERS OF THE VISIBLE WORLD

In 1859, amid a century marked by technological wonders, Oliver Wendell Holmes published the first of three articles he would write paying homage to what he understood to be the most remarkable achievement of his time: photography. Photography, the prominent New England man of letters rhapsodized, “has fixed the most fleeting of our illusions,” and has permitted them, as never before, to endure before our eyes. The momentary glance, the ineffable memory, the detailed and textured surface, could now be lifted from its particular place and time, separated from the powerful grasp of the material environment, yet still remain real, visible, and permanent. For Holmes, the process of photography had effected an earthshaking, previously unimaginable “conquest over matter.” The photograph, he asserted, was a “mirror with a memory.”

This ability to capture and preserve the disembodied countenance of things was, for Holmes, changing the physics of perception, inducing a metamorphosis in the way people would see and understand the world. Before photography, he explained, the features of a person, a place, or an object were inalterably bound to their unique material substance. True, paintings could fasten upon the effigies of the material world, but they were, at best, costly and skillful depictions, time-consuming representations wrought by the careful hand of an artist. Now, with the birth of photography, the physical environment could be forced to yield its manifold appearances directly. Form could be separated from matter. A new reality, shaped by the flourishing of dematerialized surfaces, could take hold.

For Holmes, photography signaled the beginning of a time when the “image would become more important than the object itself, and would in fact make the object disposable.” Holmes foresaw a time when surfaces would be routinely appropriated from any conceivable source, and would then take on an autonomous, yet objective, life of their own. “Form,” he proclaimed, “is henceforth divorced from matter. In fact, matter as a visible object is of no great use any longer, except as the mould on which form is shaped.” The cord between aspect and materiality had been severed.

In his essays, Holmes delineated a world in which surfaces were assuming “the effect of solidity,” and where the play of images within the vaporous ether of perception was coming to signify an ever-more potent and provocative arena of truth. Photography gave substance to the idea that images could be the conclusive expression of reality on the one hand, and exist autonomous of that reality on the other. Technically reproduced surfaces were beginning to vie with lived experience in the structuring of meaning. The image offered a representation of reality more compelling than reality itself, and—perhaps—even threw the very definition of reality into question.

Intrusive to Holmes’s analysis was his prescient understanding that the ability to reproduce the disembodied appearance of things portended the coming of a vast and mobile market in images, such as the world had never before seen. Freed from the encumbrances of matter, the look of the visible world could now be easily, and inexpensively, reproduced:

Matter in large masses must always be fixed and dear; form is cheap and transportable. We have got the fruit of creation now, and need not trouble ourselves with the core. Every conceivable object of Nature and Art will soon scale off its surface for us. Men will hunt all curious, beautiful, grand objects, as they hunt cattle in South America, for their skins and leave the carcasses as of little worth.

With remarkable, if unwitting, clarity, Oliver Wendell Holmes had laid out the contours by which the phenomenon of style operates in the world today. Holmes was writing of photography, yet his perception
that people would soon navigate the world, skin it of its visible images, and market those images inexpensively to people, reflected a keen understanding of what, in the twentieth century, would stand as a palpable indicator of material progress. For people who, in another epoch, would have been unable to afford it, the acquisition of style represented a symbolic leap from the constraints of mere subsistence.

**STYLE AND SOCIAL MOBILITY**

If the nineteenth century saw the flowering of style on a mass scale, the seeds of the modern market in style were sown centuries before. The rumblings of this development, soft at first, began to be heard in Europe, in the late Middle Ages, as mercantile trade began to stir the caldron of town life. After a period when cultural life had been dominated by wealthy monastic estates, an increase in merchant activity, and in highly skilled, urban handicrafts, transformed the once-marginal towns into hubs of economic and cultural energy. Challenging the rooted, feudal patterns of agrarian self-sufficiency, the towns became vibrant arenas for an incipient, increasingly mobile money economy. Crafts, previously controlled by the monasteries, now gravitated into the towns, into the hands of free and relatively independent artisans. Manufacture, formerly the domain of monastic power, was now beginning to produce goods for sale to a growing market of landed and urban customers.

As the exchange in goods became more and more common, and as the financing of burgeoning production became necessary, merchant enterprise flourished. Against the still imposing panorama of feudalism, the beginnings of a market society were unfolding. Implicit in these beginnings was the rise of a mobile form of wealth which challenged the very social fabric of feudalism. Whereas the old order was predicated on the notion of an eternally fixed system, the new town life represented a society predicated on change: the growth of manufactures, the expansion of markets, the circulation of wealth, progress.

Wealth and power under feudalism were depicted as God-given rights of those that ruled; the emerging wealth of the towns was merely a product of entrepreneurship. Merchants and artisans, who stood at the heart of this new development, composed a population of mobile individuals, navigating throughout society, operating beyond the margins of feudal custom.

Yet the power of feudal tradition still held sway within merchant life.

Fueled by their desire for franchise and status, the merchant class mimicked and appropriated consumption practices of the nobility. Commercial activity made luxurious items more readily available than before and provided prosperous merchants the wherewithal to acquire them. Although the merchants' fortunes were a product of commercial enterprise, their consumption patterns were designed to obtain the imagistic trappings of landed heritage. The results of this tendency characterized—to a large extent—the genesis of the bourgeois ideal of style on into the nineteenth century. Conspicuous consumption, as Thorstein Veblen would name it, was the mark of status. In a world where nobility still ruled, the merchant class seized upon symbols of excess which had customarily been prerogatives of landed elites.

Alongside the acquisition of land, other items entered the field of bourgeois consumption. Elaborate clothing, a commonly understood mark of power, was now available to a successful merchant. This caused the nobility some consternation. Before the rise of merchant wealth, the sartorial rights of nobility were assured by the fact that only they could afford to acquire sumptuous garments. Painstaking and delicate needlework was at their disposal. With the expansion of mercantile wealth, however, the nobility began to erect legalistic means to protect their privilege. From the 1500s on, the old feudal order began to establish “sumptuary laws,” specific guidelines governing the wearing of apparel. Even within the detailed proscriptions of the law, however, the rising prominence of the bourgeoisie was evident. A law adopted in Augsburg, in 1530, for example, noted that “only princes, knights and their ladies were permitted to wear brocade” and “velvet garments were for patricians,” but the law also allowed members of the “upper bourgeoisie” “three ells of velvet to decorate their headaddresses.”

Aspiring merchants also fueled the development of a broader market in art objects. Earlier in the Middle Ages, intricate crafts were the product of a localized, “household” economy; artful objects, for the most part, were produced for the pleasure and grandeur of landowners. Beautiful illuminated manuscripts and ornamental handicrafts rarely changed hands, except “in the form of occasional presents or in the execution of direct commissions given to particular craftsmen.” With the expanding market in artisan crafts, however, art became a prestigious item to purchase. The trade in art objects began to grow; style was becoming something one could acquire.

The emerging commerce in appearances is well illustrated by the proliferation of “deluxe edition” manuscript books which came with the rise of the commercial towns. Before this period, books were articles of
"supreme luxury," treasured possessions of feudal nobles. The labor involved in producing one illuminated manuscript was enormous. Months, sometimes years, were spent creating these sacred objects of beauty. Ownership of books was an incontrovertible sign of one's status in the world, and—given the religious nature of most texts—one's closeness to God. Clearly, these volumes were collected more for the admiration they inspired than for their literary use, and book craft and design accentuated this display function.

With the emergence of a bourgeois market in style, however, interest in such one-of-a-kind treasures became more widespread. To feed a market of hungry consumers, new workshops were established to produce illuminated and decorative Books of Hours, ornately illustrated religious calendars which, in the past, were extraordinarily rare specimens of beauty. Even before the development of the movable-type printing press, Flemish artisans modernized the labor process in order to satisfy the mimetic desires of parvenu taste. Marcel Thomas, keeper in the Department of Manuscripts, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, described the intricate division of labor that prevailed in these new, market-oriented workshops:

The trade in these Books of Hours was the virtual monopoly of certain specialist workshops, and in these, above all, an ingenious division of labour allowed time to be saved and made possible proper mass production. Ateliers of this kind existed in Flanders, and . . . illuminators would produce identical stock scenes for each of the main religious festivals (the Nativity, the Annunciation, etc.) while scribes copied out the different calendars of the various dioceses, so that they could then be joined on to those sections of the Books of Hours which did not vary from diocese to diocese.

Illuminators even perfected a process which permitted them to make several copies from one original.6

To prosperous townfolk of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the ability to acquire such items of beauty was a sign that, from all appearances, one had arrived.

Another example of the emerging market in style is found in the expanding industry of religious iconography. By the fifteenth century, religious art, historically associated with monasteries and cathedrals, could be brought into the home.7 The gravitation of religious art from the sanctity of the cathedral to the secular and personal realm of the home may be understood as a matter of style as well as of religion.

On a qualitative and functional level, style embodied a significant transformation. Previously, dominant imagery had spoken on behalf of the hierarchic world view of feudalism. It was a representation of a worldly, and presumably heavenly, chain of being. Even the clothing of nobility and clergy belonged more to an office than to a person. It represented a certain station in the broad range of fixed stations that encompassed the whole of humanity.

With the bourgeois market in style, however, images became—more and more—marks of individual, autonomous achievement. They became property, possessions, things that reflected upon the person who owned them, more than on the intricate web of obligation and power that constituted society. Where images and things had once connoted one's place within an immutable network of social relations, they were now emerging as a form of social currency in an increasingly mobile commercial world.

When the burghers of the late Middle Ages decked themselves with the veil of aristocratic style, they established a pattern that would advance over the centuries to follow. The installation of style as a device by which people sought to strengthen an unsure footing in the world was a decidedly modern evolution, one which in the twentieth century is
easily recognized. Yet despite this familiarity, the style of these merchants was in significant ways different from the scope or texture of style that we experience today.

One of the most dramatic differences was in access. In the contemporary world the sirens of style are far reaching; their song touches nearly every imaginable commodity; they are regularly employed by people as part of an idiom of everyday life. During the formative period of a money economy, however, style was still a province of elites. It was a conceit of those relatively few merchants whose expanding wealth allowed them to obtain the iconography of prestige. For the overwhelming majority, peasant life and poverty set the boundaries of existence. Even with the growth of cities, most townspeople lived in squalor. In a hand-to-mouth world, material goods were scarce; they were simple vernacular products, made from readily available resources, and crafted at home.

Inseparable from the question of access to style lay that of production. Today’s style market is geared to the rhythms of mass production, inextricably linked to the proliferation and promotion of standardized goods. Before the nineteenth century, such a connection would have been unimaginable. Style was defined by elegant handicrafts, each produced individually, from conception to completion. To be a person of style—aristocrat or bourgeois—implied the ability to pay for and command the patient skills of artisans in the satisfaction of one’s desires.

By the seventeenth century, a market in style had become a fixture of European elite culture. In the reign of Louis XIV, the monarchy struck a deal with mercantile capitalism, establishing France’s supreme position as a marketer of style. The king’s principal financial advisor was Jean Baptiste Colbert, the son of a cloth merchant from Reims. Colbert stitched his merchant roots to the splendor of the court and “gathered together all the plans and expedients of his predecessors for a prolonged attempt at establishing an entirely self-sufficing national economy.” At the heart of this enterprise lay Colbert’s ingenious strategy for French economic development. “With our taste,” he declared, “let us make war on Europe, and through fashion conquer the world.” Central to his notion of taste was the promotion of the French style industries, industries marked by an ability to construct and communicate an aristocratic veneer. Since that time the predominance of French \textit{haute couture} has been legendary. As illustrated by the case of Colbert in the court of Louis XIV, the “skinning” of the aristocratic world was, ironically, achieved by the very force that was—in the long run—undermining its historic dominion: an advancing, mobile market economy.

To a large extent, Colbert’s innovations represented a culmination more than a beginning. The ability to coordinate luxury markets was predicated on the already established presence of such markets in French society and elsewhere. By the sixteenth century, Western European markets were filled with refined and delicate goods: silk and woolen cloth, fine pottery, spices, rare woods for inlaying furniture. These and other items contributed to an increasingly affluent life-style for those capable of purchasing it.

The variety of goods that poured into Western European markets, and which increasingly defined European standards of luxury, were dependent—to a large degree—on the development of European expansion into resource-rich areas of the world. The rise of European colonialism, and the establishment of plantation slavery in the Americas, made certain key luxury items increasingly available to an enlarged, status-conscious market of \textit{nouveau riche} consumers. The growth of international shipping, and the “precocious industrialism” of slavery, as anthropologist Sidney Mintz has characterized it, made the importation and mass production of former rarities more and more possible. The world was yielding an ever-widening variety of skins, multiplying the variety of styles to be consumed.

Among the extravagances of royalty that began to enter the marketplace were items which, at first, may appear to have little to do with style: tea, coffee, cocoa, tobacco, and sugar. An examination of the last of these, however, illuminates the significance of colonialism and slavery in an emerging bourgeois style market.

Before the fourteenth century, sugar had been a substance of unimaginable rarity. Coming from the Middle East, as a spoil of the Crusades, it entered the lives of nobility in small and treasured parcels; its consumption was an unmistakable mark of exclusivity. By the sixteenth century, however, sweets were crossing the boundaries of bourgeois life, seducing the senses and affirming the social position of mercantile wealth. The sugar plantations of the Caribbean were adding refinement to the lives of an expanding middle class. Just as feudal aristocrats had placed sugar trinkets on their tables as symbols of their power, now wealthy commoners decorated their dinner tables with “subtleties” made of sugar.

While kings and archbishops were displaying magnificent sugar castles and mounted knights, the aspiring upper classes began to combine “course paste” men-of-war with marzipan guns to achieve analogous social effects at their festive tables. Some of these people were probably only newly ennobled; others were prosperous merchants or gentry.
By the eighteenth century, the “transformation of regal subtleties into bourgeois entertainments” was relatively complete, revealing the curious capacity of style to serve as a mark of privilege and a device of democratization simultaneously. Sugar had become an entrenched middle-class habit. Britons prided themselves in their daily, afternoon dose of stimulants (tea) and sugar. Confectionery cookbooks appeared, offering recipes that exploited the display possibilities of sugar. The elaborately decorated wedding cake had become institutionalized in bourgeois custom; a multitiered monument to middle-class prosperity had been erected.10

THE TRIUMPH OF THE SUPERFICIAL

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the rise of factory production, the ability to standardize goods found an ever-widening sweep of applications. The era of merchant capitalism was giving way to that of industrial capitalism.

The mechanical reproduction of styled goods, previously possessions of extreme wealth, signaled the beginnings of a mass market in style. The possibility of what Warren Susman has termed a “culture of abundance” was rearing its head. This development constituted the flowering of a provocative, if somewhat passive, definition of democracy. The revolutionary conception of democracy that had flourished during the eighteenth century had been predicated on the notion of an active citizenry, shaping their world for the common good, rejecting the symbols and prerogatives of elite power in favor of social equality and natural rights. The new consumer democracy, which was propelled by the mass production and marketing of stylish goods, was founded on the idea that symbols and prerogatives of elites could now be made available on a mass scale. The values of elite culture were simultaneously upheld and undermined by this peculiar variant of democracy.

The impact of industrialism on the character and scale of the style market was prodigious. Industries previously characterized by artisanal handcrafts, and by a relative scarcity of output, were now able to turn out enormous quantities of goods. Elegantly worked surfaces, once the product of slow and deliberate skill, were now the product of high-speed, less-skilled, factory processes.

Using the methods of mechanical production, factories applied stamping, pressing, embossing, and other methods to leave the look of hand-working on the surfaces of their goods. The historian of architecture and design Siegfried Giedion reminds us that “pressing, stamping, casting result in standardization and, closely connected therewith, the interchangeability of parts,” yet the surfaces of many of these early products did everything they could to deny their industrial origin.11

In Europe, and in the United States as well, a widening middle class was able to purchase mass-produced imitations of aristocratic style. “Pressed glass” bric-a-brac had the semblance of cut-glass patterns molded onto its surface; “profile cutting lathes” and “stenciled painting” gave mass-produced furniture the suggestion of fine hand-carving.12 Clocks, once the extravagantly tooled possessions of the few who could afford to own them, were mass produced by the early decades of the nineteenth century. For the members of an expanding middle class, the historically coded look of wealth was coming within their means.

This trend toward embossed ornamentation gave mass-produced style a powerful appeal, one that continues to beckon. By the 1830s, according to the historian of industrial design Arthur J. Pulos, “the application of art and style” to the surfaces of manufactured goods had become “important to their marketing.” Before the nineteenth century the term design had referred to the planning of a product from its inception: laying out of patterns, choosing materials, constructing, correlating the object’s contours to its eventual function, and the application of ornamentation. By the 1830s, the term design was assuming a modern definition, describing the superficial application of decoration to the form and surface of a product. The notion of decoration was becoming more and more distinct from the overall plan of production.

This separation of form from substance became a characteristic paradox of nineteenth-century industrialism. By the latter half of the century, the notion of design as the application of a mystifying mask had become established as a principle of the age. The Viennese historian and cabaret entertainer Egon Friedell defined the ruling ethic of the period, and of the twentieth century as well, as a “delight in the unreal.” In a broad panorama of the late nineteenth-century style market, Friedell offers a vivid, if chaotic, characterization of this “delight”:

Every material used tried to look like more than it is. It is the era of a universal and deliberate swindling in the use of materials. Whitewashed tin masquerades as marble, papier mache as rosewood, plaster as gleaming alabaster, glass as costly onyx. The exotic palm in the bay window is impregnated or made of paper, the tempting fruit in the epognee is of wax or soap. The rose shaded lamp over the bed is just as much a “property” as the cozy log fire in the grate; neither is ever used. On the other hand,
Architecture was deeply affected by the separation of surface and substance. Up until the nineteenth century, formal architecture made regular use of “load-bearing walls,” walls that—in addition to any decorative motif they might have—provided the support system of the building, held the building up. Even though it was common to apply neoclassical or other facades to brick wall surfaces throughout the eighteenth century, walls served an important structural function. In designing them, an architect had to combine purposes of engineering and ornamentation simultaneously. Even when ornate facades were used to cover a wall surface, they required the time-consuming skills of stone cutters to produce. There was a connection, a symbiosis, between the intricacy of the image and the method of craft being used to fashion that image.

By the 1830s and 1840s, however, these interconnections between image, structure, and method of construction were, in large degree, severed. “Modern” methods of construction, employing an inner structural frame that held the building up, began to be used more and more frequently. Developed in the United States in the 1830s, these new kinds of buildings originally had wooden “balloon frame” structures which were then covered with a “skin.” By the 1840s, the balloon frame construction of buildings became a standard approach to industrial architecture, as wood was replaced by iron in the infrastructure.

Central to this new approach to construction was the fact that walls no longer played a structural role. They became decorative “curtains,” to be hung and attached onto the structural frame. As walls lost structural significance, however, their ornamental aspect escalated. Like the household objects that transmitted a cacophony of appearances in this era of the “unreal,” external wall panels were also being stamped out in a multiplicity of often discordant styles. With the development of industrially manufactured cast-iron panels, embossed to suggest the look of other places and times, the disembodied skin became a regular feature of modern architecture.

With the rise of the balloon frame and the curtain wall, the enterprises of the engineer and architect became increasingly separate, often at odds with one another. While the engineer’s task was one of making a building structurally sound, the architect was becoming what one industrial designer has called a “merchant of whimsy.” The eclectic and pretentious quality of much nineteenth-century architecture betrays this commitment to surface as an end in and of itself. In Chicago, often considered the birthplace of modern architecture, cast-iron building fronts, molded to look like various historical styles, were the vogue between 1855 and 1870. After this period, other materials were used. In each case, however, there was an intrinsic tension between the look of a building—which attempted to reproduce a style originally achieved by the chisel of a preindustrial craftsman—and a method of construction which was only hastening the degradation or annihilation of the decorative crafts.

Style in architecture was becoming a matter of pure appearance. Substantive issues were more and more inconsequential. There was an all-consuming effort to capture the multifarious auras of elegant grandeur, and to employ those auras to construct a veneer of cultivation. The Renaissance was there for the taking; other ostentatious motifs multiplied as well. Romanesque, Rococo, Baroque, Italianate, each provided a florid shell, an eye-catching alternative reality.

Nowhere did the triumph of the superficial leave its mark more powerfully than at the Columbian Exposition of 1893. Held in Chicago, as a tribute to the vigor of American industrialism, the fair constituted an orgy of facade. Even promotional literature for the exposition noted the ironic tension between the fair’s neoclassical official image and the context of the American Midwest: “How sweet it is to think that great things and great thoughts cannot die; that out of the raw young life of the prairies should spring this lovely bit of Grecian genius.” The entire fair was a flimsily constructed masquerade. Iron frameworks were covered by iron and wood sheets. Facades were then applied, molded out of staff, a concoction of cement, plaster, and jute fibers.

If the substance of the fair’s construction was uniform and cheap, its surfaces recalled a precious symphony of styles. The “White City,” the focal point of the fair, was a tribute to the Renaissance.

The Midway of the fair, on the other hand, appropriated a wide and
diverse world of imageries, placing the triumph of American industrialism at the center of a global context:

The Midway in effect formed a colossal sideshow, with restaurants, shops, exhibits, and theaters extending down a huge corridor, six hundred feet wide and a mile long. . . . Here the Beaux-Arts neo-classicism of the Court of Honor [the White City] gave way to Barnumesque eclecticism, refined order to exuberant chaos. Fairgoers threaded their way on foot, or in hired chairs among a hurly-burly of exotic attractions: mosques and pagodas, Viennese Streets and Turkish bazaars, South Sea Island huts, Irish and German castles, and Indian tepees.17

The entire world, in its various visual incarnations, was there for the taking. What Oliver Wendell Holmes had seen as the intrinsic outcome of photographic technique had been elevated to the level of a social principle.

A trade in stylishly emblazoned surfaces had been established as a cardinal component of an American consumer society in formation. The rapidly expanding inventory of industrially produced goods was being routinely camouflaged by a suggestive aesthetic veil. The interior life of nineteenth-century industry was marked by low wages, long hours, and severe standards of discipline; meanwhile the outer face of industrial society was developing an ingenious ability to stamp an alternative way of seeing—one that evoked a sense of abundance—across its visible exterior.

PICTURES OF REFINEMENT

The implementation of mass-produced style was not limited to the surfaces of material goods or monumental environments. The "delight in the unreal" found one of its most seductive arenas of expression in association with new techniques of visual representation. In a society that was reaching new levels of appreciation for the ephemeral power of images, the simultaneous developments of chromolithography and photography opened up astonishing new avenues of mass impression.

Propelled by the development of cheap yet dazzling color dyes, and by printing techniques brought to the United States by immigrant German and Russian printers, the proliferation of chromolithographs, from the 1840s onward, reached across the barriers of caste and class. Within the framework of pre-nineteenth-century life, oil paintings, like luxurious clothing or objects, were designations of status. Their absence from the lives of common people were part of the fact of class, as was their presence in the homes of those who displayed them as property.
Access to the sumptuous image was limited to those few able to enjoy what John Berger has called the “special relation between oil painting and property” that has endured for hundreds of years.\(^{18}\)

Although original oil paintings continue, even today, as emblems of wealth, chromolithography was able to capture some of their luster, depth, and richness of color. Many chromolithographs were brilliant reproductions of paintings previously unknown and unseen by their now democratized audience. Chromos transported the visual trappings of high art into that democratized, emerging consumer marketplace. Late nineteenth-century advertising and packaging made continual use of chromolithography. Packages of cigarettes, soap, flour—the stuff of daily life—were covered with alluring images ranging from sultry women to gorgeous depictions of nature, town life, royalty, and historical settings. The world of products was now initiating a highly visible and relatively inexpensive appeal to the popular imagination. Superficially ornate goods were linked to broadly disseminated images, creating an interwoven fabric of mass-produced style.

As style reached out to a more broadly defined “middle class” of consumers, the value of objects was less and less associated with workmanship, material quality, and rarity, and more and more derived from the abstract and increasingly intractable factor of aesthetic appeal. Durable signs of style were being displaced by signs that were ephemeral: shoddy goods with elaborately embossed surfaces, advertising cards, product labels. If style had once been a device by which individuals tried to surround themselves with symbols of perpetuity, now it was becoming something of the moment, to be employed for effect, and then displaced by a new device of impression.

This ephemerality finds no better example than in the fad for disposable paper products that developed in the United States during the 1870s. Chromo technology was used to imprint dazzling, luxuriant looks upon disposable paper goods. Paper “waistcoats, bonnets, aprons, hats, tapestries, curtains, carpets,” all items which in their original form represented delicate and time-consuming craft, were now mere visual gestures toward craft, to be used, and then thrown away.\(^{19}\)

The symbolic province of elegance had been democratized. Colorful art had been the customary privilege of the rich; now the dissemination of chromos began, on a symbolic level, to break the monopoly of possession. Only the quality suffered. The market in chromolithographs spread rapidly. They were merchandised by mail, distributed door to door, used by advertisers, and offered as premiums. They could be purchased in galleries as well. Amid the gray tonalities of industrial life, chromos appeared as a tangible rupture in the customary, exclusive

privileges of the upper class. Chromos were a dramatic enactment of democracy, albeit a democracy of images. Their dissemination broke through the symbolic boundaries of an old and restrictive order, and at the same time paid homage to the cultural property and traditions of that order.

More than any nineteenth-century development, perhaps, the rise of photography amplified the power of image over substance as an earmark of modern style. Developed in France, already noted for its market in luxuries, photography became—almost immediately—a prime medium of pretension.

Before photography, portraiture had been linked to the traditions of easel painting. A portrait was an acknowledged possession of wealth. Men would have themselves, their families, occasionally their mistresses, and their property painted as a tribute to their own existence, as a visualization of the riches at their command. Just as owning certain kinds of objects was understood as a mark of personhood, a portrait was a sign of social franchise. With the birth of photography, during a period in which style was beginning to be industrially mass produced, portraiture boomed. Portrait studios flourished from the 1840s onward, in the United States, as more and more people sought to acquire the emblems of station. Miniature portraits, known as “tin-types,” were sold at these studios for a mere two cents. Holmes, writing in 1863, remarked on the new, democratic potential implicit in photographic portraiture:

Prices have . . . come down to such a point that pauperism itself need hardly shrink from the outlay required for a family portrait-gallery.

. . . A portrait such as Isabey could not paint for a Marshal of France—a likeness such as Malbone could not make of a President’s Lady, to be had for two coppers—a dozen chefs d’oeuvre for a quarter of a dollar\(^{20}\)

Studies were fitted with props to invest the people being photographed with the accoutrements of wealth and status. Customers would have themselves photographed in fine clothing (often provided by the studio), against elegant surroundings (a painted, theatrical backdrop). When the portrait was ready, and mounted in an ornately embossed pasteboard frame or album, people would bring home a bona fide testament to their eminence, regardless of circumstances. The portrait, as composed by the photographer and packaged in an ornamental frame, suggested a connection to the traditions of handcraft and high art. Actually, such portraits were products of large-scale enterprises which often employed a sophisticated, industrial division of labor.

This tension between image and reality is evident in Holmes’s de-
scription of a visit to one of New York's largest portrait mills, the Broadway studio of Messrs. E. and H. T. Anthony. The account discusses the manufacture of products for the packaging of photographs, in a large, steam-powered plant:

The luxurious album, embossed, clasped, gilded, resplendent as a tropical butterfly, goes through as many transformations as a "purple emperor." It begins a pasteboard larva, is swatched and pressed and glued into the tradition of a chrysalis, and at last alights on the center table gorgeous in gold and velvet, the perfect imago.

Each single process in the manufacture of elaborate products of skill oftentimes seems and is very simple. The workmen in large establishments, where labor is greatly subdivided, become wonderfully adroit in doing a fraction of something.... A young person who mounts photographs on cards all day long confessed to having never, or almost never, seen a negative developed, though standing at the time within a few feet of the dark closet where the process was going on all day long.21

Everything about the look of the product was at odds with the material process of its production. This general pattern was coming to characterize much in the way of industrially produced style, but it was perhaps most fitting in the realm of photography, where the ability to exaggerate experience, to create believable imagistic fictions, stood at the heart of its power to depict and transmit style.