



CHINESE ROOM IN THE HAVEMEYER RESIDENCE, 1894.
 Photograph by Joseph Byron. © Museum of the City of New York.

The Artificial Kingdom

A TREASURY OF
 THE KITSCH EXPERIENCE

with

REMARKABLE OBJECTS OF ART *and* NATURE,
 EXTRAORDINARY EVENTS, ECCENTRIC BIOGRAPHY

and

ORIGINAL THEORY

plus

MANY WONDERFUL ILLUSTRATIONS SELECTED
by the AUTHOR,

CELESTE OLALQUIAGA

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 1998

Au bonheur des dames

(To the ladies' happiness)

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The Crystal Palace

*We suppose that in a few months
the glittering palace of iron and glass, the most
unique and remarkable building in
the world, will be as entirely a thing of the past
as the ice-palace of the Empress of
Russia that thawed in the summer sun.*

*Illustrated London News ON THE
CRYSTAL PALACE, SATURDAY, OCTOBER 11, 1851¹*

THE vast commercial expansion of glass during the nineteenth century greatly enhanced the modern pleasure of looking and collecting. In England, the glass market changed dramatically after the heavy taxes imposed on its importation from France were lifted in 1845, while in Italy, centuries-old glassmaking traditions underwent an important revival. Besides opening a whole new range of decoration and design, the availability and versatility of glass paved the way for a novel kind of preser-

1. "In the year 1740, the Empress Anne of Russia, caused a palace of ice to be erected upon the banks of Neva. This extraordinary edifice, was 52 feet in length, 16 in breadth, and 20 feet high, and constructed of large pieces of ice cut in the manner of free-stone. The walls were three feet thick. The several apartments were furnished with tables, chairs,

vation and visual display that promoted a highly voyeuristic optical sensibility, starting with the Parisian arcades.

The possibility of observing from a safe distance grants both a temporal remove (the case of natural history specimens and dioramas) and the disengaged but empowering anonymity that comes from being the subject of a voracious gaze whose object is confined and subordinated. This very distance changes the status of the object, which loses its commonness to become a thing worthy of such attention. So, while until now display had basically remained secondary to function—practical, religious or cognitive—with the advent of industrialization the lack of uniqueness of mass-produced objects was offset by the spectacularity of their presentation.

It is very fitting, then, that the first monumental-scale exhibit of industrial products took place in London's 1851 Crystal Palace. Following the arcades' paradigm—which would be emulated throughout the nineteenth century, accounting for covered passageways in London, fastuous galleries in Milan and Naples, and enormous commercial centers in Berlin and Moscow—the Crystal Palace was a gigantic structure of iron and glass dedicated to a new way of looking, that of the potential consumer. With its uninhibited emphasis on display, proliferation and artifice, and the global proportions of its reach as a trade fair, the Crystal Palace pretty much inaugurated the modern era as we know it.²

beds, and all kinds of household furniture of ice. In front of the edifice, besides pyramids and statues, stood six cannon, carrying balls of six pounds' weight, and two mortars, entirely made of ice. As a trial from one of the former, an iron ball with only a quarter of a pound of powder was fired off, the ball of which went through a two-inch board, at sixty paces from the mouth of the piece, which remained completely uninjured by the explosion. The illumination in this palace, at night, was astonishingly grand." From "A Palace built of Ice," in Samuel G. Goodrich, *The Cabinet of Curiosities, or Wonders of the World Displayed: Forming a Repository of Whatever is Remarkable in the Regions of Nature and Art, Extraordinary Events, and Eccentric Biography* (New York: Piercy and Reed, 1840), vol. 1, p. 180.

2. Surprisingly, no one seems to mention the arcades as the obvious architectural pre-

Formally the "Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations," the Crystal Palace was built as a glittering homage: it was a place where people went to render honor, in the form of amazement and admiration, to the mass production that became Western culture's new form of royalty. Built in a record seven months and located in Hyde Park, the Crystal Palace covered eighteen acres—and six elm trees—with 956,165 square feet of panes of sheet glass. It was the first entirely mass-produced building, using new construction materials and a gridiron plan later to become the basis for constructing skyscrapers.

The first of the great world's fairs (there were fifty-eight international fairs between 1851 and World War I, eleven of which were considered major), the Crystal Palace received six million people, a daily attendance average of 42,831—with reduced cost of admission on certain days—during the six months it remained open, from May through October 15, 1851. It was visited by everyone from Queen Victoria, who went with her children up to twice weekly in the first months and had her own retiring room in the premises, to those that had never before left their villages, such as eighty-five-year-old Dolly Pentreath, who walked almost three hundred miles to the Crystal Palace from her hometown of Penzance, carrying mackerel on her head to pay for lodging.³

"Neither crystal nor a palace, it was a bazaar," complained someone of the overwhelming display of over 100,000 articles from 14,000 exhibitors (half of which were British) that occupied eleven miles of stalls.

cursors of the Crystal Palace. Most writers are content to cite the story of how it was designed by a royal gardener, Joseph Paxton, who, inspired by the structure of greenhouses, rough-sketched it on a piece of paper, putting an end to the difficult quest for a winning design for the exhibition. For the history of the Crystal Palace, see Patrick Beaver, *The Crystal Palace, 1851-1936: A Portrait of Victorian Enterprise* (London: Hugh Evelyn, 1970).

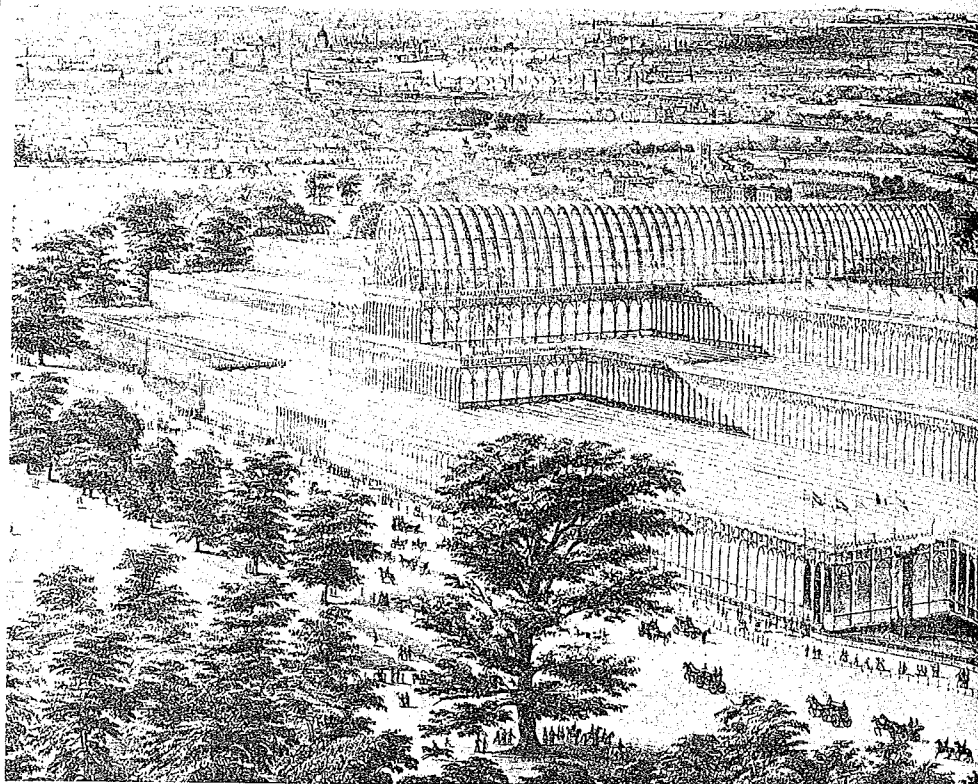
3. On world's fairs, see Jane Shadel Spillman, *Glass from World's Fairs, 1851-1904* (Corning, NY: Corning Museum of Glass, 1986). On who attended the trade fairs, Toshio Kusamitsu, "Great Exhibitions Before 1851," in *History Workshop Journal*, no. 9 (Spring 1980): 70-78. Queen Victoria's routine is described in Beaver, *The Crystal Palace*, p. 64.

Besides displaying the most recent products of Western industrial mechanization (a hydraulic press, marine and fire engines and locomotives, many of which were kept in motion with steam from boilers outside the palace), the exhibit, divided by sections, displayed an unprecedented accumulation that included raw materials and manufactured goods—textiles, jewelry and medical instruments—from around the world. The first international trade fair had something for everyone and a few things for no one, like the knife with 1,851 blades, a cross between a Christmas tree and a cactus; the "Silent Alarm Bed," which would throw the sleeper on the floor at a certain time; and the "talking telegraph," where a head in a box moved its mouth while code symbols appeared above it in flags. It also had a "Model Dwelling House" whose design was supervised by Prince Albert, the driving force behind the Great Exhibition, and a model of a floating church, both of which probably paled next to the model of the Liverpool docks, complete with sixteen hundred fully rigged ships.⁴

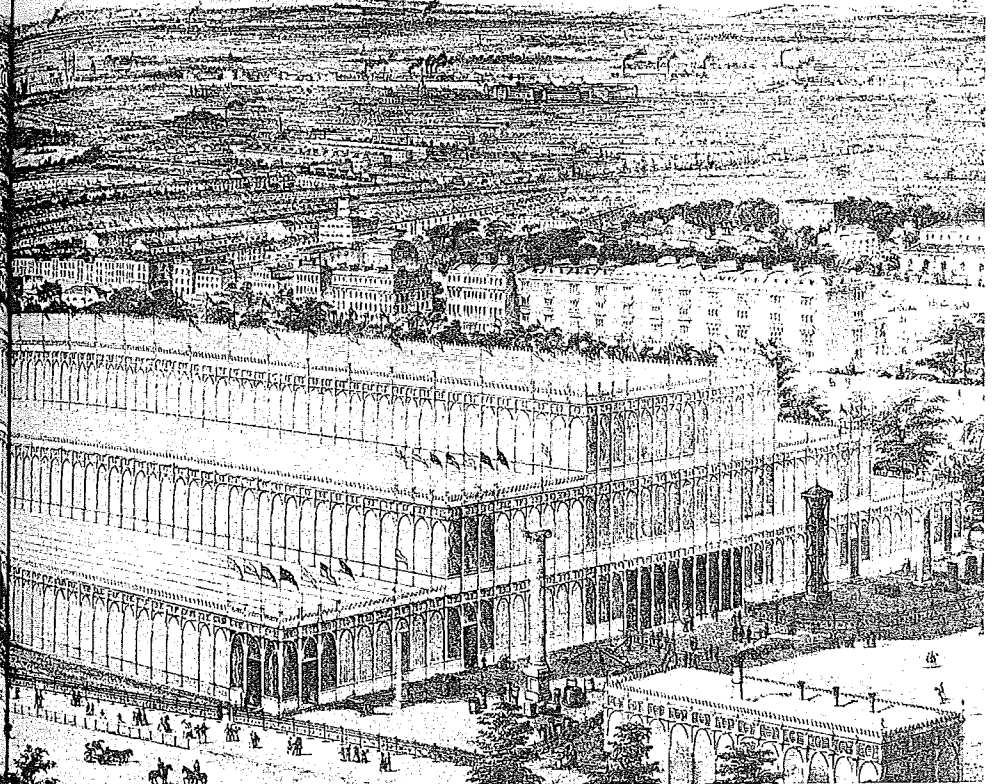
Perhaps no one expressed their feelings about this new era better than Victoria herself, a woman whose attachment to objects became so obsessive in her last years that she would not allow any of her innumerable possessions to be thrown away or even altered, and if something—a carpet, a curtain—fell into total disrepair, she would have it replicated to perfection. When even this was not enough, she had all of her belongings photographed from several angles, and the photos—along with their

and in the following excerpt from the exhibit's catalog: "Whatever may have been the weather, or however crowded the interior, Her Majesty has devoted, almost daily, until the close of the session of Parliament released her from attendance in London, several hours to visits to the Crystal Palace; inspecting each department in succession, and selecting from many of them such objects as gratified her taste, or were, for other reasons, considered to possess claims upon her attention." From *The Art Journal Illustrated Catalogue of the Industry of All Nations* (London: George Virtue, 1851), p. xxiii. The story of Dolly Pentreath, who even had a meeting with the queen, is told by Paul Hollister, Jr., in *The Encyclopedia of Glass Paperweights* (Santa Cruz, Calif.: Paperweight Press, 1970), p. 38.

4. Beaver, *The Crystal Palace*, pp. 47-56.



PANORAMIC VIEW OF THE CRYSTAL PALACE IN HYDE PARK, LONDON. From Patrick Beaver, *The Crystal Palace, 1851-1936: Portrait of a Victorian Enterprise*, 1970. Built in a record seven months, the Crystal Palace was designed by Joseph Paxton, formerly head gardener to the duke of Devonshire. Paxton based his iron-and-glass design on the giant Amazonian water lily, whose six-foot-wide leaves are ribbed in such



a way that they can bear the weight of a sixty-three-pound child. The Crystal Palace was the first entirely mass-produced building in history, and the extent and amount of glass covering it (400 tons, one pound per square foot) has not been exceeded to this day. Its main arched transept housed several giant elm trees. *General Research Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.*

corresponding entries indicating not only the objects' main features but also their exact location in the rooms of her domains—placed in huge albums through which the elderly queen browsed at leisure. More than sixty years before, Victoria had been one of the first to compare the awe that she felt at the magnitude of the Great Exhibition to a religious experience: "... it was magical—so vast, so glorious, so touching," she wrote in her diary about the Crystal Palace's inauguration. "One felt filled with devotion, more so than by any service I have ever heard."⁵

An unprecedented opportunity for business competition and expansion, the Crystal Palace also became a meeting place for friends and lovers, an escape for middle-class women and a didactic outing for families, easily merging industrial affluence and leisure time. As such, it was the forebear of those microcosmic universes known as shopping malls and amusement parks; and, in fact, an amusement park of a very special kind the Crystal Palace became, once the Great Exhibition was over and its massive structure was dismantled, relocated and reassembled in 1854 on Sydenham Hill, a half-hour away from the heart of London. During its first thirty years the Sydenham Crystal Palace was visited by about two million people a year, a transit load for which special railway lines were built. The palace overflowed with special attractions that took place inside the building, in its immediate surrounding woods or in the boating-lake: balloon ascents, rose shows, cat and dog shows, trade fairs, art exhibitions, electrical, mining and photographic exhibitions, music festivals, and meetings of societies such as the National Temperance League and the Salvation Army.

A bizarre mix of all kinds of activities, the Sydenham Crystal Palace

5. Ibid., p. 41. On Queen Victoria's object obsession, see Lytton Strachey, *Queen Victoria* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1921), pp. 398–401. Victoria's collection, along with the numerous exhibits presented to the exhibition's organizers after it closed, eventually became a substantial part of London's Victoria and Albert Museum, and also gave rise to the Science Museum and Library, the Natural History Museum, the Geological Museum, the Imperial Institute, the Royal College of Science, the Royal School of Mines,

even housed schools of art, science, literature, music and engineering. Among its many spectacles the most popular and dramatic seem to have been the war shows: "Invasion," orchestrated by John M. East, drew about twenty-five thousand spectators for each performance, during which a life-size village, with its shops, church and school, was destroyed by enemy bombs, "the screams of trapped and dying children coming from the ruins," and later reconstructed for the next performance. A nineteenth-century Disneyland, the palace's last and biggest event was the construction in miniature of the British Empire for the coronation of King George V in 1911, complete with a railway on which visitors could tour, among other things, a South African diamond mine and an Indian tea plantation.⁶

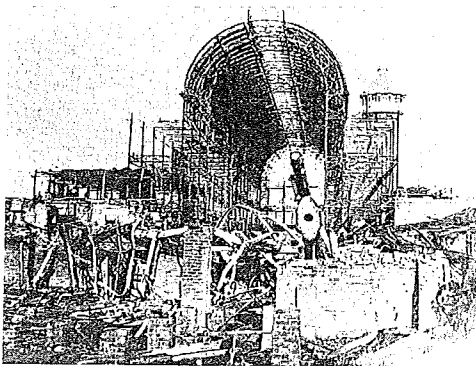
Despite its popularity, the Crystal Palace went bankrupt that same year and was confiscated and later used as a naval depot during World War I. Rescued from total oblivion by a private fund set apart for this purpose before the war, for the next twenty-five years the palace sat silent, a shadow of its former splendor, on top of Sydenham Hill, coming alive only on Thursday evenings for fireworks. It is ironic that these never started any accidents, because, melting away as the *Times* had figuratively predicted eighty-five years before, on November 30, 1936, the Crystal Palace was swept by an unrelated fire that destroyed it in less than six hours, its darkened ruins later to be made into a national park.⁷

the City and Guilds College, the Royal College of Art, the Royal College of Music, the Royal College of Organists and the College of Needlework.

6. Beaver, *The Crystal Palace*, p. 110. Charles Brock's fireworks displays were considered the most spectacular of all, with "every naval battle of any importance reproduced in fire on Sydenham Hill. The last one was the Battle of Jutland, which had to be seen to be believed. As huge battleships, outlined in fire, bombarded each other from opposite sides of the lake, the explosions of the shells were reflected in the water as they might have been at sea. Ships blew up and slowly sank. . . ." (ibid., p. 132).

7. For a childhood reminiscence of the palace's old age, see "The End," pp. 141–48 in Beaver, *The Crystal Palace*. The ruins of the Crystal Palace can be visited on Sundays, although little more than steps and broken statues remains. However, there are occasional

Perhaps the most outstanding criticism of the time leveled against the Great Exhibition centered on the eclectic character of its numerous works of art and the massive application of organic design to manu-



REMAINS OF THE NORTH NAVE, RUINS OF THE SOUTH NAVE, AND BAIRD TELEVISION LABORATORIES. After the 1936 fire, some goldfish were found still swimming in an ornamental fountain in the North Nave. A local newspaper had reported them as "missing, believed boiled." Photograph by the late Arthur Talbot, by permission of Kenneth W. Talbot.

facture and industry. Foreign and national exhibits were accused of breaking with "pure" classical form, thus indulging in bad taste, reckless romanticism, narrativity and, worse than anything else, banality, eventually adding up to that most vilified of all artistic phenomena, a profanity so young that only around this time did it acquire a name: kitsch. And kitsch the Crystal

Palace had galore, particularly the garden variety, like the bucolic sculpture of the Prince of Wales as a shepherd, or the use of crucifixes and rosaries for product display.⁸

Most offensively for its critics, the design presented at the 1851 exhibition sought to imitate nature, an overabundance of iron leaves, glass flowers and wooden antlers making of the Crystal Palace a sort of immense, transparent winter garden whose fauna and flora were wonder-

walking tours and a great souvenir store run by the volunteers of The Crystal Palace Foundation. In 1853 New York City built its own Crystal Palace, a replica of the English one, in what is now Bryant Park. It also housed the World's Fair of the Industry of All Nations, and burned down in 1856.

8. Beaver, *The Crystal Palace*, pp. 57-59. The word "kitsch" is of German origin and began to be used in the mid-1800s in Munich to degrade certain forms of art. Its etymol-

fully frozen. Making the novel world of industrial production more familiar by shaping it after plants and animals, this mixing of the old with the new ideologically "naturalized" machinery and manufacture by giving them the appearance of being products of nature rather than of human labor. In this combination of the organic and the mechanical, nineteenth-century design strived to create those "wish images" where the world appeared harmonious and effortless—in a word, utopian.⁹

Yet, at an exhibit whose explicit goals included the reunion of aesthetics and manufacture, it was not this utopian aspiration that was abhorred but the degree to which "the naturalist school of ornament" took it: unlike previous organic styles, the Victorian ornament was not a decorative element of the object, but became its central feature.¹⁰ This "disastrous confusion of ornament and design" became the target of condemnation, not only for relegating the primary function of the object to a secondary position, but also—and perhaps more importantly for

ogy includes *verkitschen*, to make cheap, and *kitschen*, to collect junk from the street. See Matei Calinescu, "Kitsch," in *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1987), pp. 225-62. For the essay that inspired the decades-old criticism against kitsch, see Hermann Broch, "Kitsch and Art-with-a-Message" (1933), reprinted in Gillo Dorfles, ed., *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste* (New York: Bell Publishing, 1968), pp. 49-67; this is the uncredited source of Clement Greenberg's influential text "The Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), in Dorfles, pp. 116-26. Broch later expanded his own essay into "Notes on the Problem of Kitsch" (1950), also in Dorfles, pp. 68-76. See also his *Hugo von Hoffmannstahl and His Time: The European Imagination, 1860-1920*, trans. and ed. Michael P. Steinberg (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984). Dorfles's anthology has been a cult classic on kitsch since the 1970s. The anti-kitsch position that it endorses (for which Broch's and Greenberg's early texts were fundamental) remains to be challenged. I attempt to do so in practice here, as well as in "Holy Kitschen," in my *Megalopolis: Contemporary Cultural Sensibilities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992). I also outline the history of the kitsch debate in a short essay entitled "The Dark Side of Modernity's Moon," in *Agenda*, no. 28 (Summer 1992): pp. 22-25.

9. On Benjamin and the utopian aspect of organic ornamentation, see Buck-Morss, "Mythic Nature: Wish Image," *The Dialectics of Seeing*, pp. 110-58.

10. John Gloag, *Victorian Taste: Some Social Aspects of Architecture and Industrial Design from 1820 to 1900* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1979), pp. 130-58. Phrases quoted in this and the following paragraph are from this text.

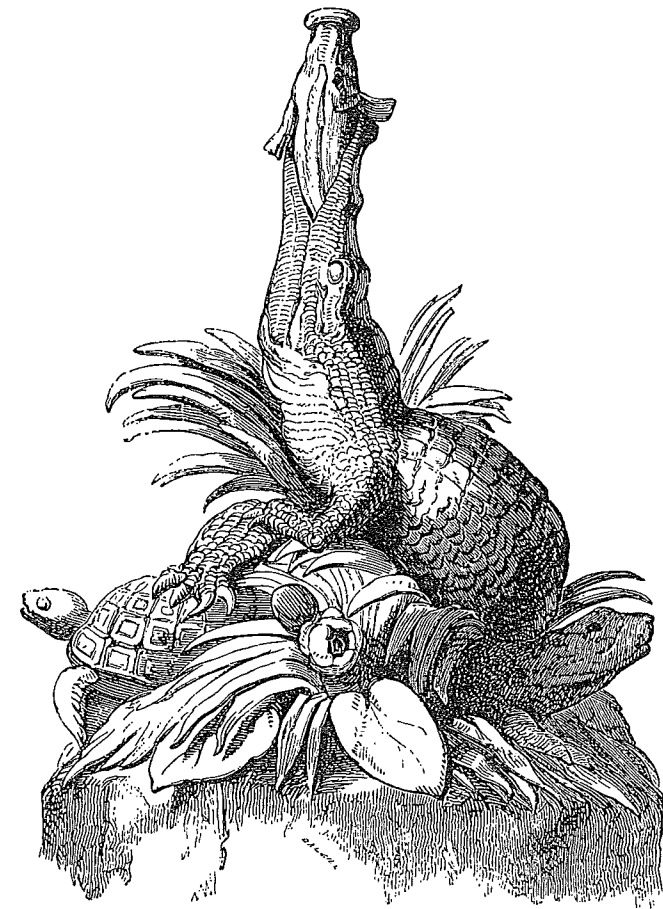
kitsch—because once function had been thrown to the winds, what followed was an unbounded proliferation that paved the way for another kind of displacement, that of the original by the copy: “Nothing can be worse than art at second-hand, more especially when the associations and feelings of the two sets of workers, the original and the imitators, are totally different.”¹¹

The Victorian love of “imitation and disguise” went even further, eventually blurring the limits between fantasy and reality in what may be considered either a botched attempt at realism or a fantastic vision of reality, according to one’s point of view. This is the case with the use of natural history specimens, which although increasingly popular as collectibles since the Renaissance, became truly massive commodities in the nineteenth century. An integral part of the developing genre of trade known as world’s fairs, this booming market was represented in the Crystal Palace by thousands of specimens, including the already extinct dodo bird and three or four hundred varieties of hummingbirds.

In most of these, taxidermy, as it had been developed since the sixteenth century, consisted in the precise rendition of the animals’ physical appearance, a radical departure from the ancient embalming methods that had “sought to preserve the substance of the body rather than its form,” often with totally unrecognizable results.¹² Full of respect for their dead and for all sacred species, neither the ancients nor the early natural history collectors would have ever dreamt up anything like the anthropomorphic exhibits at the Crystal Palace. Among the most outrageous were Hermann Ploucquet’s extremely popular “comicalities”—fifteen hundred in total—where birds, weasels, cats, hares and other

11. Robert W. Edis, “Decoration and Furniture of Town Houses,” a series of lectures delivered to the Society of Arts in 1880, as quoted in Gloag, *Victorian Taste*, p. 158.

12. “Taxidermy, and Ethnographical Models,” in John Tallis, *Tallis’s History and Description of the Crystal Palace, and the Exhibition of the World’s Industry in 1851* (London and New York: John Tallis and Co., 1852), vol. 2, pp. 187–91.



ORGANIC ORNAMENTATION AT THE CRYSTAL PALACE. From *The Art Journal Illustrated Catalogue of the Industry of All Nations*, 1851. Cast-iron fountain by M. André of Paris. All elements of the composition were drawn from animals and plants associated with water. Jets of water rose from the mouths of the fish, otter, turtle and frog (on the back), which in turn were surrounded by a water lily, floating reeds and bending rushes.

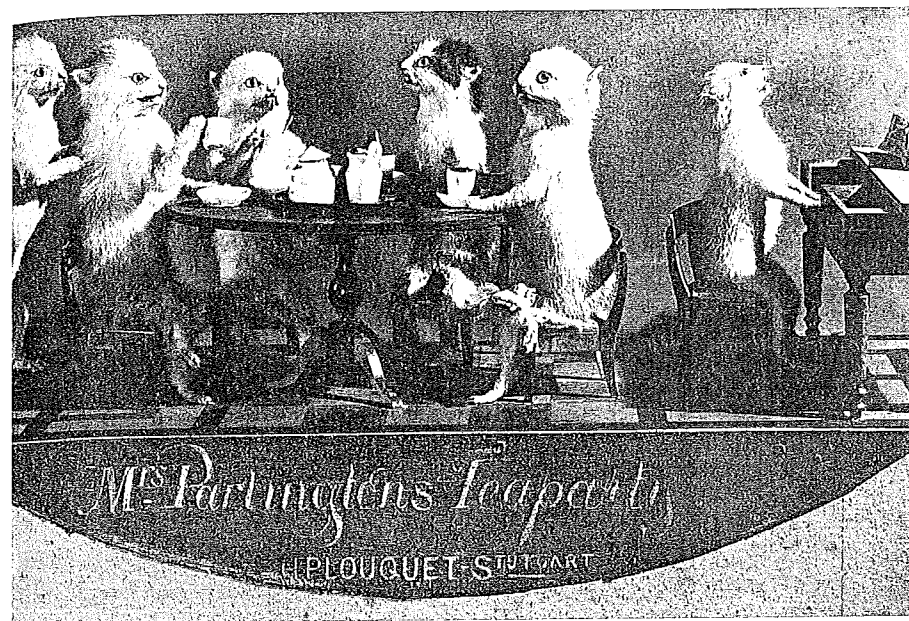
animals were posed to depict "comical, humorous and interesting scenes in animal life," like the group of ermines sitting at a table sipping tea from teacups while another member of their party plays the piano.¹³

By the late 1800s, stuffed animals and anthropomorphic displays gave way to the rage for "animal furniture," with the representations of animal parts replaced by the animal parts themselves: elephants' feet served as liquor stands, chairs stood on the four legs of rhinoceros or zebras, hat stands were made from antlers, tiger jaws held clocks and ostrich legs stopped doors. This fad was attributed to women's use of entire birds—instead of only feathers—on their hats in the 1860s, which was followed by the craze for tiger and bear claw jewelry, until the jungle effect invaded the entire home. "For some reason, innumerable monkeys were sold to light up billiard-rooms, the little animals swinging from a hoop with one hand and carrying the lamp in the other. After a time people other than those who had dead pet monkeys wanted to possess these unique lamps, so that defunct simians from the Zoo had to be eagerly bought up, and Mr. Jamrach, the famous wild beast importer, was vexed with orders for *dead* monkeys."¹⁴

Rather than its reaching for a utopian "natural" experience through technology, one could say the Crystal Palace's best-kept secret was its justified fear of losing a world that it loved all too well but was slowly sacrificing to scientific and industrial progress. With the organic standing metaphorically for use value and for production unmediated by technology (and therefore presumably having a more direct relationship to reality), the loss of the organic was perceived as the death of a dimension

13. I owe this reference, and my initial acquaintance with the Crystal Palace, to Miriam Gusevich's "Purity and Transgression: Reflections on the Architectural Avantgarde's Rejection of Kitsch" (Milwaukee: Center for Twentieth Century Studies, working paper no. 4, Fall 1986). Her argument for the ermines as kitsch is consistent with what I will later distinguish as nostalgic kitsch.

14. William G. Fitzgerald, "Animal Furniture," *Strand Magazine* 12 (Sept. 1896): 273-80.



THE ERMINES' TEA PARTY. From Patrick Beaver, *The Crystal Palace, 1851-1936: A Portrait of Victorian Enterprise*, 1970. This was one of fifteen hundred animal "comicalities" by the taxidermist Hermann Ploucquet of Stuttgart. They were meant to imitate "the attitudes, habits and occupations of rational creatures." *General Research Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.*

from which Western culture had derived a great deal of its meaning for centuries.

This became particularly discernible at the moment when the organic was dealt a mortal blow by modernization, with ornamental plants and animals quite literally representing a last-ditch effort to retain a sense of belonging to the natural order.¹⁵ While the traditional concept of nature was still topically retained as a nominal assurance that things were not as radically different as they seemed, nature had already moved one degree away from its former status. Whereas it used to provide a model for understanding or organizing a certain sense of the world, now nature became an icon of itself, valid for representing the beauty of a supposedly orderly and predictable phenomenon which humans could refer to for ontological orientation.

The constant overlapping of the scientific approach to nature and organic ornamentation in the 1800s is perhaps the best indication of how ambiguous this new role of nature still was. The attack against the kind of organic ornamentation sponsored by the Great Exhibition was a clear reaction to a modernity that sought to fragment what had been perceived until then as an unproblematic whole—the role of nature in culture, no matter how distorted—while simultaneously attempting to retain part of this meaning under a new guise. Yet, instead of railing against the exhibition's overall objectification of nature (in the use of live plants as "a new and delightful sort of furniture ornament," for instance), the attack focused on only one aspect of this materialization, that which transformed a transcendental notion into industrial décor.¹⁶

15. As I have been suggesting, the distinction of the natural world as an object of inquiry or collection (as opposed to a symbol) started long before the nineteenth century, which is really the culmination of this process. The history of natural history is discussed below, in "The Organ of Marvelousness."

16. "The Vegetable World," in *Art Journal Illustrated Catalogue*, p. viii. This essay and the one quoted at the beginning of the next chapter, "The Exhibition as a Lesson in Taste," were omitted from the catalog's 1995 reprint by Gramercy Books.

In other words, rather than a critique against the new modes of production and consumption taking place at the Crystal Palace, what surfaces is the struggle between two concepts of nature, both of which claim exclusive ownership over the organic realm: the traditional one, where a theologized view of nature provided culture with symbolic meaning; and the modern one, which destroyed this view by reformulating nature according to rational, scientific paradigms and techniques, while simultaneously and contradictorily seeking to regain through this fragmented emblem what, by its own doings, was permanently gone.

Like the demise of that aura to which nature is inextricably bound as the bearer of a sense of authenticity, the downfall of the natural order triggered an immediate longing for and glorification of what was lost. Consequently, nature knows in the nineteenth century an unparalleled popularity, although always in a role subordinated to human whims: either fossilized in the emerging field of natural history or abstracted in the Romantic sensibility's quest for an immanent spirituality. In both cases, nature's modern role as the mirror of a human-centered cosmos is reproduced in its object status, with science and industry constantly perfecting ways to retain this evanescent realm.