

CHAPTER 12 - "Seven Ages" of Furniture

The chapter "Seven Ages" of Furniture from "Worldly Ways and Byways" delineates the evolving tastes in household decoration of an American couple as a metaphor for broader cultural and personal growth. It begins by painting a picture of young American couples, including the trope of the insightful wife and her adoring husband, navigating their way through various stages of domestic aestheticism, influenced largely by their financial status, exposure to different cultures, and the prevailing tastes of their times.

Initially, young couples start their homes with hand-me-down furniture, often bulky and unattractive pieces passed down as gifts from older relatives. This period is marked by a lack of originality and personal input into the home's decoration, reflecting an embryonic stage of cultural and aesthetic awareness.

The narrative then transitions to what is termed the "Japanese period," where the wife, embarking on a journey of self-culture and experimentation, begins to overlay the grim furniture with silk, gauze draperies, and oriental ornaments. This phase symbolizes a rudimentary attempt at personalizing their living space, influenced by superficial trends rather than a deep understanding of art and design.

As the couple's financial standing improves, they move into a phase of gaudy opulence, replacing the eclectic mix with what the narrator views as monstrosities of design—rooms filled with inlaid woods, complicated ceiling designs, and flashy furniture. This stage represents an uncritical embrace of wealth's possibilities, manifesting in a lack of cohesive aesthetic vision.

The narrative continues to describe the couple's progression through various fashions of interior design, including the dark and imposing "ecclesiastical junk shop" look influenced by English trends and a failed attempt at adopting aristocratic French styles in their grand new house. Each phase reflects a deeper engagement with the world of art and decoration, though often misguided by trends and the availability of disposable income rather than a true understanding of design principles.

In the final stages, disillusioned by the hollow allure of luxurious but impersonal decorations, the couple recognizes their superficial understanding of true artistry in furnishing and design. They come to understand that genuine appreciation and application of art in one's living space require a depth of knowledge and guidance they have yet to achieve, setting the stage for further growth and exploration.

This chapter not only chronicles the aesthetic evolution of a couple in terms of their material surroundings but also mirrors the broader societal shifts in taste and the pursuit of cultural sophistication. Through their journey, the narrative critiques the often unquestioned adoption of trending styles and the superficial treatment of art and culture as mere symbols of status, prompting a reflection on the values that truly enrich human life and spaces.