Professional Interior Photography
To Leo George with love
CONTENTS

Preface
vii
Acknowledgements
ix

1 The artistic interpretation of interiors
1
2 Specialist hardware for image capture
14
3 Recording mediums: film versus digital
31
4 Lighting equipment, meters and filters
48
5 Approach: composition, styling and lighting
63
6 Technique in practice
79
7 Interiors with mixed lighting
96
8 Problem interiors
105
9 Creative techniques
126
10 Presentation and storage, film and digital
141

Appendix: Profiles and techniques of some masters of interior photography
155

Bibliography
178

Index
179
With the publication of every new edition of this book we have taken another few steps in the shift from silver halide photography to modern digital imaging. Indeed, the first edition in 1993 failed to even mention the advent of ‘electronic imaging’ as it was then known.

But now plenty of photographers, including those featured in this book, are making use of digital technology in one way or another. In the last edition, I said we were ‘standing on the brink of the digital imaging revolution’. That revolution is now establishing itself at an ever-accelerating pace, going beyond digital press work and high-end studio systems, to commercial location work, including interiors. Even film giant Fuji ran a recent advertising campaign with the slogan: ‘Film. It’s a creative choice’, thereby acknowledging the real choice there is to be made between the two mediums.

Chapter 3 takes a close look at the advantages and disadvantages for interior photographers in the ‘film versus digital’ debate, and features Ashley Morrison, an interior photographer who works almost exclusively with digital cameras and can scarcely find enough words to praise the positive aspects of this new technology.

This book is written as a companion volume to Professional Architectural Photography, which concentrates on the photography of the structure of buildings, especially their exteriors.

Michael G. Harris
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I extend my very special thanks to all the photographers, past and present, whose work features in this book. We all share a similar passion that transcends time, enabling us to appreciate equally the work of interior photographers working 100 years ago with those at the top of their profession today.

I am particularly indebted to Ashley Morrison who shares with us the details of his digital working practices in Chapter 3, along with Derek Kendall, Brian Harrison, Andreas von Einsiedel and Peter Aprahamian who give us an invaluable practical insight into their lives and working methods in the Appendix at the end of this book.

My thanks also go to my commissioning editors Christina Donaldson and Marie Hooper for their assistance, enthusiasm and encouragement, and to Peter Grainger and his colleagues at Photocare Laboratories in Tonbridge for their efficient, high quality processing and printing services.

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All the photographs in this book were taken by the author unless otherwise specified.
THE ARTISTIC INTERPRETATION OF INTERIORS

We seem to have a natural fascination with the way people choose to decorate and furnish their homes, as is borne out by the multitude of interior magazines that grace the shelves of every newsagent. This is in part nosiness – to catch a glimpse of a private sanctuary that usually remains behind closed doors – and in part an aesthetic appreciation of interior design, from which personal styles can be developed or copied. The extent to which this is successful depends on the confidence of the designer and stylist to create aesthetically appealing interiors, and the ability of the artist or photographer to express these three-dimensional atmospheric experiences as mere two-dimensional images. This chapter begins with a look at how artists and photographers have chosen to depict interiors, and concludes with a brief history of interior decoration as useful background knowledge.

Seventeenth-century interpretation
The artistic interpretation of interiors has a long historical tradition, perhaps best exemplified by the Dutch masters of the seventeenth century. The exaggerated realism of the contrast of light and shade in their paintings stimulates in the viewer a sense of magic, romance and nostalgia.

The oil painting by Pieter de Hooch in Figure 1.1, An Interior, with a Woman Drinking with Two Men (1658), is a fine example, and his work is described by art historian Mariet Westermann in The Art of the Dutch Republic 1585–1718 (1996) in the following way:

De Hooch, and the majority of painters represented in this book share one of the uncanniest realist strategies: a fine meticulous handling of oil paint that makes the
individual strokes of paint difficult or impossible to discern. This smooth technique, combined with a keen regard for the reflections and refractions of light and the appearance of different colours and textures under various illuminations, creates the widely acknowledged photographic quality of Dutch paintings. Indeed . . . these paintings can seem to outdo the most sensitive of photographs in capturing textures revealed by light. This look of truth depends on the viewer’s perception that no one had a hand in the representation: the meticulous, smooth technique erases all evidence of handiwork. The effect is paradoxical, as the artist’s ostensible self-effacement in technique almost immediately calls attention to its very brilliance.

This passage perfectly mirrors the art and techniques of interior photography: a ‘realist strategy’; ‘a keen regard for the reflections and refractions of light’; and, most importantly,
that ‘this look of truth depends on the viewer’s perception that no one had a hand in the representation’.

Interior photography strives to achieve the same goal, but with different tools and different materials. This ‘look of truth’ is rarely achieved with natural light alone, because of the limited tonal range of photographic film. The contrast between the light and shade areas in an interior, though readily discernible to the eye, is usually too great to record on film: the light areas tend to ‘burn out’, and the shadow areas become a black void. In order to reduce the contrast to enable us to record the image clearly on film, we have to supplement the existing ambient light with photographic ‘fill-in’ lighting. This has to be done very subtly to preserve the atmosphere and interplay of light and shade in the room, while reducing the contrast to acceptable photographic levels. It is this subtlety that is the photographer’s ‘ostensible self-effacement in technique [that] almost immediately calls attention to its very brilliance’.

This brilliance of deception is the mark of a successful interior photograph. The challenge of balancing the variables of composition, styling and lighting to create this ‘look of truth’ is the thrill that stimulates interior photographers in their day-to-day work.

**Photographic interpretation from the nineteenth century**

With the advent of photography in the mid-nineteenth century came the emergence of the first firms specializing in the photographic recording of contemporary architecture, both inside and out. The best known in England was Bedford Lemere & Co., who set the standards for others to follow – see Figure 1.5. The firm used gelatin dry-plates, introduced commercially in the 1870s, which freed the location photographer from the portable darkroom needed for the wet collodion process, and enabled development to be undertaken long after exposure. These dry plates were also more sensitive to light, allowing much shorter development times. Harry Bedford Lemere worked with a Meagher 12 in × 10 in mahogany bellows camera using small apertures and long exposures for sharp definition throughout his images.

There was an explosion of new magazines with the introduction of half-tone printing in the 1890s whereby for the first time it was possible to print photographs and type together in a single operation. The most influential of these
Figure 1.2  Clouds, Wiltshire (1904), by Country Life photographer Charles Latham (courtesy of the British Architectural Library Photographs Collection)
was *Country Life* and it was photographer Charles Latham (Figure 1.2) whose imaginative and perfectly executed interior shots created the magazine’s tradition of fine country house photography. Through its wide readership, this in turn influenced fashions in interior design, much as interior magazines do to this day. Frederick Evans also supplied *Country Life* with interior shots, though of a more pictorial and romantic nature. He was famous for his cathedral interiors, believing that his true aim as a photographer was to record emotion: to convey the sensations, both spiritual and aesthetic, that medieval architecture aroused in him. He abandoned all-inclusive compositions for a more fragmentary approach, preferring to use the longest focal-length lens possible to create views through different parts of the buildings, meticulously recording the subtle gradations of light and shade within these medieval interiors. This approach is still seen in modern interior magazine photography to this day.

The artistic revolution of the 1920s and 1930s was a time of radical experimentation and utopian optimism in architecture, embracing new technology with the birth of functional modernism. The clean lines and forms of modern architecture suited a more abstract photographic style, encouraging dramatic lighting and camera angles, exemplified by the work of the Dell and Wainwright Partnership who were official photographers to *Architectural Review* from 1930 to 1946. They favoured bird’s and worm’s eye views for both interiors and exteriors, and oblique angle shots to show repetitive rhythms in the architecture. High contrast, stark lighting (often from a low angle) and deep shadows became the hallmark of these new interior photographs, as seen in the work of Sydney Newbery (see Figure 1.6) who became official photographer for the *Architects’ Journal* in 1920. In fact, architects faced criticism for imitating the photographer: building with lights and shadows in black and white, thereby underlining the reciprocal relationship that existed between photography and architecture at this time.

The widespread use of colour photography since the 1970s, combined with the ubiquitous growth of interior magazines, company brochures, property brochures and illustrated annual reports, have presented photographers and designers with ever more creative opportunities. A post-modern array of styles and techniques can be employed, especially with the design and photo-manipulation techniques available since the 1990s through digital imaging.
A brief history of interior decoration
Before the days of electric or gas lighting, architects designed interiors specifically around available window light, and this is still the case for most residential interiors. For modern commercial buildings, architects are more likely to design around a combination of natural and artificial lighting, but with equal intensity of consideration being given to the overall aesthetic concept. It is the work of the interior photographer to capture on film the essence of this concept, through recording the interplay of available light and shade (whatever the source) with the proportions and furnishings of the room.

There are, of course, many different ways of arranging and decorating a house. Both practical necessity and the prevailing fashions at different periods through history have influenced the common way of arranging rooms. For example, in Norman times, the discomfort caused by fires laid on the floor in the centre of the great hall led to the introduction of the fireplace, then as now the focal point of the room. Similarly, the small, wooden-shuttered windows of Norman castles were practically designed as both a defensive measure and for protection from the weather. It was not until the sixteenth century that both the size and number of windows increased as glass factories developed and houses no longer had to be built with defence in mind.

Medieval and Tudor interiors
The inside walls of medieval houses were either plastered for insulation and painted with decorative patterns, or had wainscoting made from narrow vertical boards joined together and painted. In the fourteenth century tapestries were introduced as wall-hangings, and carpets started to appear in the richest households, initially as table coverings. Furniture was scarce: some chests and coffers, benches and dining tables (boards on trestles), and the most treasured piece of furniture in the house, the bed.

The open medieval hall became partitioned with a wooden screen at one end to cut out draughts from the doors. The gallery followed soon after as a platform for musical performance. Both lent themselves to elaborate decoration in the form of carving.

By the sixteenth century ceilings were constructed in houses to add an extra floor of accommodation, and they provided an extra surface to decorate with ingenious patterns in plaster. Richly carved wide staircases would lead upstairs
to the bedrooms, library, chapel and long gallery – a room that ran the length of the house where people could walk for exercise on wet days, children could play, and concerts could be held. It was also around this time that wallpaper was introduced, providing a cheap substitute for expensive wall-hangings.

While we have concentrated so far on the grand houses built by rich landowners, the ordinary folk were also improving their houses. Wooden-shuttered windows of oiled linen or paper were replaced with bigger windows made of diamond-shaped panes of glass. Fireplaces with brick chimneys made it safer to add an upper room over the parlour, and ladders were replaced by staircases. A farmer would add a brick fireplace at one end of his parlour, with seats on either side and the fire in the middle: the ‘inglenook’.

**The seventeenth century**

James I became King of England in 1603. He actively encouraged closer links with the Continent thereby fostering the first real understanding of design in architecture and decoration, based on the classical rules of order and proportion. Until Stuart times, major buildings were the product of the combined achievements of patrons and their

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**Figure 1.3** A fifteenth-century interior, showing the bed as the dominant feature
master masons, while houses were built by craftsmen according to local tradition, using locally available materials. A well-educated client would often direct the building of his own house, having a broader outlook through travel and books than the local builder. It was Inigo Jones, as Surveyor of the King’s Works, who transformed English architecture, following extensive travels in Italy. Jones’s inspiration was the work of Italian architect Andrea Palladio, who had revived the Roman classical style of symmetrical planning and harmonious proportion as part of Italy’s Renaissance. Stone and brick were often used instead of timber, and the regular positioning of vertical and rectangular windows gave a more even distribution of light which affected the arrangement of furniture in rooms and led to the development of curtaining around windows. Doors and fireplaces were as carefully positioned as windows following the firm principles of classical building. Architects began to plan houses in a more compact and sensible way: rooms were no longer strung out in draughty wings, but were arranged on either side of a central corridor.

The eighteenth century

It was during the eighteenth century that the role of the professional architect was established as leader of a team of craftsmen. He would produce proposals for the building, both inside and out, to which the client could react and a compromise would be reached. Working in the Renaissance tradition, architects had to involve themselves with interior structure and decoration in order to create a unified, harmonious scheme. However, the architect was primarily responsible for structural work, so when just a change of interior decoration was required in a house, an upholsterer would be called in. The upholsterer would offer both an upholstery service and a complete decorating service, coordinating the work of many subcontractors.

The palatial baroque style reached England from the Continent in the 1670s. It was characterized by a desire to impress with scale, drama and visible extravagance. The ‘enfilade’ is a good example of this, whereby the doors from each room to the next are aligned to give an imposing vista from one end of the house to the other. Illusionist paintings and the ‘trompe l’œil’ effect were also popular.

The early eighteenth century saw a Palladian revival and a belief in the correctness of classical architecture. Great
wealth gained from increased trade led to the building of vast
country and town houses with pillared fronts. Such Georgian
houses had plain yet imposing exteriors and magnificent
interiors. There was always a grand entrance hall for
receiving guests, along with drawing-, dining- and card-
rooms, a library, bedrooms, etc., not to mention the kitchen,
pantries, cellars and servants’ quarters. The Grand Tour
became part of a young gentleman’s education, from which
he would acquire a mass of pictures, objects and sculpture
with which to decorate his home.

By the middle of the century, the rococo style was
imported from France as a reaction against the ‘architectural’
decoration of neo-Palladianism. By contrast, it was light-
hearted and lavish in ornamentation: asymmetrical designs
with scrolls and flowing sinuous lines. Natural forms – plants
and flowers – were used in the designs for textiles and
 wallpapers.
A further classical revival followed, initiated this time by Robert Adam after his Grand Tour at a time of extensive excavations in Italy and Greece. Neoclassical architects such as Adam were the first to design complete schemes for interiors: from walls and ceilings, through furniture and upholstery, to carpets, fireplaces, door furniture and light-fittings, the latter often in the form of elaborate chandeliers. Most of his work involved the redecoration of existing houses using curved walls, alcoves and pillars covered in fine plaster, and painted in delicate colours with gilt decoration. He used a variety of classical motifs, often enclosed in round, oval or rectangular shapes.

The nineteenth century

By the end of the eighteenth century, the classical disciplines were being swept away by the revolutionary Romantic movement of the Regency period. The formal approach to living was rejected in favour of informality. The former library became the living-room, the drawing-room was reserved only for formal receptions, and the concepts of the conservatory and breakfast-room were introduced. Convenience and comfort replaced ceremony. Sofas and chairs, traditionally placed against walls throughout the previous history of interior arrangements, were now positioned at right angles to, or facing, the fireplace where they have remained to this day. The sofa table was introduced and drapery was used in excess, especially for the highly swagged floor-length curtains popular at the time.

By the 1820s there was a growing fashion for eclectic Gothic decoration, inspired by its association with Englishness and godliness. Indiscriminate use was made of styles from Norman to Elizabethan, using rich glowing colours with plenty of gold, stained glass, heraldry and Gothic arched windows. This led to what became known as the ‘Battle of the Styles’ between the classicists and the ‘Goths’, both having complete disregard for historical accuracy. This was, in part at least, a result of the new type of patronage based on wealth rather than education. The Gothic style proved the more popular, and this is the legacy we tend to associate with Victorian architecture today.

Mass production by the mid-nineteenth century gave birth to new stores: Maples and Heal’s, for example, where customers were able to buy a whole range of ready-made goods. Interior decoration became muddled and cluttered,
exaggerated by the plethora of knick-knacks and collected objects used to express individuality in a world of mass production. An inevitable backlash to this was the ‘Arts and Crafts’ movement, inspired by William Morris, which evolved to revive handicrafts and reform architecture by using traditional building crafts and local materials.

Influenced by Morris, another reactionary was designer and architect Charles Annesley Voysey who also became a leading member of the ‘Arts and Crafts’ movement. He built a large number of unpretentious country houses, neither very large nor grand, and placed them in intimate relationship with nature. The exteriors were usually rendered with pebbledash and had long horizontal windows. The rooms had lowish ceilings and white walls, creating a very modern appearance.

*Figure 1.5* Leighton House, London (1895), by Bedford Lemere & Co., one of the first firms to specialize in the photographic recording of contemporary architecture, both inside and out (courtesy of the British Architectural Library Photographs Collection)
Figure 1.6  Fischer’s Restaurant, London (1933), by Sydney Newbery, official photographer for Architects’ Journal (courtesy of the British Architectural Library Photographs Collection)
Also born out of the ‘Arts and Crafts’ movement came Art Nouveau with its infusion of Japonaiserie, the asymmetrical undulations of rococo and, later, the influence of Celtic art. Its climax in Britain was the work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh in whose architecture and decoration the subtle colours of Art Nouveau blended with the modern, clean white interior.

The twentieth century
Of great importance just before the turn of the century were, of course, the inventions of the light bulb, the incandescent mantle for gaslight and the gas fire. Central heating for the wealthy followed soon after, though its progress was slow. By 1919 only six per cent of houses had electricity.

In contrast with the cluttered interiors of the late Victorian period, the 1920s and 1930s saw a preoccupation with minimal ‘streamline modern’, associated with speed and aerodynamics. Built-in furniture was simply painted white, with rounded corners. Swiss architect Le Corbusier described a house as ‘a machine for living in’, preferring concrete to brick, and sleek flat roofs. However, the modern movement or ‘International Style’, with its lack of decoration and ornamentation, had little appeal for the rich and fashionable who preferred to continue with Renaissance and rococo styles.

The longest lasting style of the twentieth century has been the ‘country house look’, established by decorators Colefax and Fowler in the late 1930s. The style is associated with what many have regarded as the ideal way of life, and has been promoted by such magazines as Vogue, House and Garden and Country Life ever since. While there is a growing appreciation for modern interior decoration, we still enjoy revivals and the influence of the halcyon past, as has characterized the history of interior decoration.