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History of Interior Design as a profession: The Earliest sightings



By Michael Jumba

Interior Design as a profession has evolved for four centuries. The earliest sightings of interior design can be traced back to the period 17th - 19th Century. During that time, the world and particularly the United States and the United Kingdom were undergoing tremendous changes popularly called the agricultural revolution. This revolution gave Britain and the United States the most productive agriculture in Europe and North America that culminated in their yields reaching 80% of the European and American continents in the 19th century.

A key enabler of the agricultural revolution was the mechanization of farming. Farm machines were developed in rapid succession: the automatic wire binder, the threshing machine and the reaper-thresher or combine. Mechanical planters, cutters, huskers and shellers appeared, as did cream separators, manure spreaders, potato planters, hay driers, poultry incubators and a hundred other inventions.

As a consequence of the increased food supply, the population of England and Wales gradually rose from 5.5 million in the 1700s, 9 million in the 1800s to 32 million in the 19th



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Century. This population rise accelerated the decline of the agricultural share of the labour force adding to the urban workforce- a key ingredient for industrialization.

With a population that had tremendously increased, it meant that not everyone could engage in agriculture. This meant that a sizeable portion of this population had to migrate to the city and end up being the urban workforce. Also, because food supply was enormous, some of the produced food was for the market rather than the farmer and their family. This led to the development of markets.

With markets having developed, commerce was enhanced. This required merchants, products, customers, credit and forward sales, knowledge of markets and pricing as well as factors that affected supply and demand. This made the markets grow to a national one motivated by London among other growing cities. Commerce was motivated by roads and inland waterways that made transportation of produce to these markets easier.

With a sizeable population living in urban areas and which was assured of a steady supply of food, provision of housing became necessary and more so because more people were expected to migrate to these urban areas and which they eventually did. This led to the rise of domestic life in the towns and cities of the 19th century.

Domestic life in the towns and cities of the 19th century was full of contrast. There were elegant surroundings of the spacious middle-class household in the suburbs that were a world apart from the bleak surroundings of the overcrowded informal settlements in the urban core. With the former tastefully furnished and decorated to reflect the values and aspirations of respectable family life, [interior design](#) was born.

Progress in agricultural evolution continued and it led to the industrial revolution. This shift to an industrial-based economy brought with it a new perception of the conventional home. It allowed city workers to see their houses not just as roofs over their heads or shelters from the storm, but as places where they could extend their office work, sleep, entertain themselves, take refuge and above all, provided physical comfort and peace of mind from the noisy, depressing and exhausting work environment. This new reality created a new profession of individuals whose lives revolved around making the house a home and a home more liveable.

Because women at the time were spending more time at home, they were the group that accounted for a majority of individuals who did this home beautifications and decorations with the [carpenters](#), metal-workers, masons and painters being contracted to do works that



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involved their trades. Women specialized in making [upholstery](#), drapery among other decorative products that were then sold to large departmental stores of America and England.

During these early times, interior design was more of amateurish. Interiors were rarely designed by one person for one person and was composed of a wide variety of object. Also, because of the absence of photography, historical records of interiors are scarce in supply. Interior design was largely private and lacked branches such as the corporate/ commercial branch.

With this era lacking a recognised profession that had a professional organization, the articulation and monitoring of standards and codes of conduct, the institution of clear educational routes and means of assessment, networking and gate-keeping were absent. In other words, there existed a general sense of a lack of professionalism.

[To be Continued...]

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