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How to cite:

Harrison Moore, Abigail. "Switching from the Master to the Mistress: A Women's Guide to Powering Up the Home." In: "Women and Energy," edited by Abigail Harrison Moore and Ruth Sandwell, *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society* 2020, no. 1, 25–29. doi.org/10.5282/rcc/9067.

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Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN (print) 2190-5088  
ISSN (online) 2190-8087

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Abigail Harrison Moore

## Switching from the Master to the Mistress: A Women's Guide to Powering Up the Home

I am interested in the role that interior design, and particularly the work of the first women professional advisors on home decoration, had on energy decisions. My paper aims to bring together decorative art history, the politics of suffrage and the socialist attitudes of the Arts and Crafts Movement, and the direct instructions that were given to women about how to design and furnish their home at a time—the 1870s and 80s—when women were beginning to take on a key role in purchasing items and commissioning designs for their homes. Into this mix came an important set of advice books, including those published by Macmillan in their pioneering series *Art at Home*.

By focussing on two such books written by women for women, Agnes and Rhoda Garrett's *Suggestions for House Decoration* (1877), in which they spoke directly to the “ladies of the family” and Mrs Mary Eliza Haweis's *The Art of Decoration* (1881), I explore the influence they had on women's decisions as to how to light (and heat) their homes. This time period saw the expansion of the idea that domestic décor was an expression of a woman's personal character, linked to the concept of the home as a reflection of and influence on a person's morality and cleanliness. The guidebooks suggested that interior design was a public reflection of personal taste, and, as such, the fear of “getting it wrong” opened up a clear space for the development of professional decorators to assist and help avoid *faux pas*. At first, the majority of these “experts” were men, but it soon became clear that women were influential in the privacy of the home and would respond well to being guided by professional women.

Mary Haweis's first section in *The Art of Decoration* is called “The Search after Beauty,” and, clearly influenced by John Ruskin and William Morris' Arts and Crafts credos, she starts with a chapter called “The Art Revolt.” She begins with a statement that, although addressed to everyone, is seemingly focussed on genteel women, those able to afford the services of a decorator or designer: “Most people are now alive to the importance of beauty as a refining influence. The design of your home is not just about aesthetics and function, but about spirituality and care.” This idea was illustrated by the “important matter of warming and ventilating a house” and played to the rhetoric propagated by

those selling the first domestic electric lighting systems, who stressed that it was “clean” both in terms of emitting no dirt in comparison to gas or oil, and in terms of illuminating the dust in the corners of one’s home. Technologies that aided cleanliness, ventilation, and orderliness, although widely believed to be important to maintaining the health of the family, were not enough on their own. It was argued by Arts and Crafts commentators such as John Ruskin that only the cultivation of beauty would arouse the higher feelings. The pressure on the female consumer, therefore, was high and keenly felt. This is probably one of the reasons why Mary Haweis’ book was widely read and the Garretts’ book became such a commercial success, with six editions published by 1879 and 7,500 copies printed. The 1880s saw the rise of the department store, of Heals and Liberties and Harrods, and with this the ability of the customer to choose. But with choice, the inevitable concern about getting it wrong, and the pressure on women to create a house that reflected their moral standing as well as their taste, it is no wonder that the need for a guide did not fade away, but continued to grow with the move from working with a single designer or architect to buying from a range of shops and companies.

“Drawing Room  
Chimney Piece”  
from *Suggestions  
for House Decora-  
tion in Painting,  
Woodwork and  
Furniture*, by Rhoda  
and Agnes Garrett  
(London: Macmillan  
and Co., 1877).



Haweis’s comments on the role of the decorator also functioned as a call for women to exercise their own rights: “The province of a decorator is not to take your house out of your jurisdiction; he might as well control all your possessions and sell everything he did not personally covet. His province is to help you in that mechanical part which you cannot do yourself. He may guide you; he must not subjugate you.” In the 1870s, Agnes and Rhoda Garrett did several women’s suffrage speaking tours together and were committed members of the cause. Rhoda argued to an audience at the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science in 1876 that, “the woman’s sphere and woman’s mission is one of the most important problems of the present day, but here, at least, in the deco-

ration and beautifying of the house, no one will dispute their right to work.” As Elizabeth Crawford argues, house decoration was indeed taken up by some women as an agent of reform, “both carrying with it a moral imperative and furthering the woman’s cause.” The Garretts’ ambition to see the role of women in society transformed was not only represented by words but also in deeds: in 1875 Agnes and Rhoda set up their own business, “A & R Garrett House Decorators,” from their home at 2 Gower St. Bloomsbury—the first all-female design and decorating company in Britain.

The arrival of professional interior decorators indicated a new attitude to home decorating. In the late nineteenth century there was a reaction particularly from middle-class customers and designers, who deplored the failure of the interiors trade to provide decorative schemes that met with the moral and aesthetic standards of beauty they expected in their homes. Arts and Crafts objects that celebrated craftsmanship, materiality, and function were therefore promoted as conforming to Christian values that domestic life should demonstrate, and as having a political and social, as well as aesthetic significance. The Garretts and Mary Haweis clearly articulate the Arts and Crafts origins of their ideas in their books and in their advice on lighting design and installation. Good, honest design was weighted with the idea of proper god-fearing Britishness, and therefore the pressure increased on those tasked with choosing how to spend their money when decorating and lighting their homes.

From an energy point of view, the two volumes interestingly span the period that saw a move from gas to the increased possibility of electric lighting. Haweis’s book is particularly significant. Whereas the Garretts, writing in the 1870s, could only choose from gas, oil, or candlelight, in Chapter VIII of *The Art of Decoration*, Mary Haweis turns to guidance on “Lighting and Ventilation” and produces one of the earliest examples of a woman advising women on electric lighting in England that I have come across to date. Given the date of publication, in 1881, during the very earliest period of electrification—only one year after William Armstrong had first lit up Cragside using Joseph Swan’s lightbulbs—it is unsurprising that Mrs Haweis starts her chapter on lighting with the statement: “Until the electric light is more manageable than it now is, there are two ways of lighting rooms—gas or lamps and candles.” Electric lighting remained a luxury in the UK even in 1900, and so Mary Haweis was very much ahead of the times in 1881 when she stated, “When the electric light comes into common use, the problem how to light adequately a large room without heating it will be solved.” She recognised that,

for women particularly, new lighting types would alter the appearance of the home, and mean change for those who spent most of their time in it: the women of the house. Therefore, they were the ones most concerned about both the practicalities and the aesthetics of change. In the battle between the gas and electricity companies, women were key in convincing women as consumers which energy source to plump for in the home.

It was in the same year as Mary Haweis published her contribution—1881—that the British House of Commons was first lit by incandescent lamps. The first great exhibition of electricity was held in Paris, and the electrical company Crompton installed a thousand Swan lamps to illuminate the Savoy Theatre. But, as there was still no centralised supply of electricity, and current had to be provided from expensive generators installed on individual premises, these innovations attracted widespread popular attention but did not move as quickly into the home as the electrical companies would have liked. For electricity to be adopted in the home, and chosen over alternative energy carriers, there needed to be a programme of persuasion. Printed materials would both celebrate the design and technological possibilities of adopting this energy source, and challenge a rhetoric of fear—of threat to the body and home—and the aesthetic revulsion to electric light held by many, especially women. Agnes and Rhoda were pioneers in changing the opportunities open to women, and, as decorators, were also pioneers as women advising women on planning and furnishing their homes. Mary Eliza Haweis was a pioneering woman in the history of electrical lighting. As such, these women deserve to feature more prominently in the histories of energy.

**Further Reading**

Crawford, Elizabeth. *Enterprising Women: The Garretts and Their Circle*. London: Francis Boutle Publishers, 2002.

Edis, Robert. W. "Internal Decoration." In *Our Homes and How to Make them Healthy*, edited by Shirley Forster Murphy, 309–65. London: Cassell and Co., 1883.

Garrett, Rhoda and Agnes Garrett. *Suggestions for House Decoration in Painting, Woodwork, and Furniture*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1877.

Haweis, Mrs Mary Eliza. *The Art of Decoration*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1881.