You thought the style police were strict today? Some Victorians thought "bad taste" dangerous enough to spark a revolution. Sarah Wise unearths the Gallery of False Principles in Design

A taste for danger

For a few weeks in 1852, the whole town was laughing. At Marlborough House, Pall Mall, a gallery curated by Henry Cole and Richard Redgrave — the men who were eventually to found the Victoria and Albert Museum — was filled with a selection of objects they considered to exemplify everything that was wrong with design in England. They called it the Gallery of False Principles in Design; everyone else called it the Chamber of Horrors.

The contents of the room remain mysterious. The only exhibits known to exist today are a brass gas-lamp with blue convulvulus jets and a red, green and lilac floral furnishing fabric, one of seven chintzes to be publicly shamed. Other "horrors" may be lying around in the V&A's vaults, but many of the objects in the show have doubtless been summarily executed for violating the rules of good taste. The whereabouts are unknown of a bottle in the shape of a pink snake; a blue flower-pot in the form of reeds tied with a yellow ribbon (apparently one of the nation's biggest sellers); a pair of scissors shaped like a stork; and a large jug like a tree-trunk (perhaps they're in an attic near you). However, Cole and Redgrave wrote a detailed, and curmudgeonly, catalogue, and it has not been hard to winkle out likely near-relatives of the monsters that lurked in the Chamber's cabinets.

Henry Cole and Richard Redgrave, below far left, set up the Gallery of False Principles on Design to hold up to ridicule such evils as the 1840s papier-mâché tray, far left, and the 1848 gas jet in gilt brass and glass, left. Below: wallpaper and fabrics endlessly and excessively decorated with items that you would not normally walk on, such as the Crystal Palace and lilacs and roses, were particularly proscribed

You may think the objects pictured on these pages are hideous — loud, vulgar, twee; you may think them desirable bits of kitsch to show off your exquisitely honed sense of irony. But it would never cross your mind that that tray with the peasants staring at a pile of dead birds, or the Crystal Palace wallpaper, were bad for your soul — would it?

That, really, was the subtext of the catalogue written by Cole and Redgrave — with additional comments by Pugin. Like hellfire preachers, they condemn the "heresy" of English designers "who think novelty better than chaste design, and show preferable to truth". Excessive decoration is "improper", while tableware with pictures on is "objectionable" (even if it is a piece of Sèvres) because you cannot see the picture when food — a plate's *raison d'être* — covers it up. Even restrained old Josiah Wedgwood came under attack; his factories had been churning out fake Classical funerary urns as household ornaments since the 1770s, and these are denounced as "but the resurrection of a dead art — inconsistent with modern uses". It was the brass lamp, though, that worked them into the biggest fit — the catalogue entry reads: "Gas flaming from the petal of a convulvulus! One of a class of ornaments very popular, but entirely indefensible in principle."

Cole and Redgrave had wanted the following decoration eradicated: highly detailed depictions of flowers and plants, especially "coarse" blooms (the lilac chintz had "a want of repose" and was "in the worst possible taste"); anything depicted on a carpet that one would not normally walk on — animals, buildings, clouds, for example ("flatness should be one of the principles for decorating a surface continually under the feet"); wallpapers that endlessly repeat a picture (they particularly disliked seeing railway stations, the Crystal Palace and views of the Serpentine all over walls); pictures reproduced on a surface to be covered up (the plate and two papier-mâché trays fail this test); glass that has been made to look unlike glass — the white glass vase of 1850 offends on three counts since it looks like porcelain, has fairly detailed plant-life enamelled on to its surface and makes the "mistake" of not allowing the user to see the liquid inside — another Cole and Redgrave faux pas.

What worried the curators was the sheer popularity of some of the worst offenders. The Chamber of Horrors catalogue is an expression of anxiety

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