

Interior of a Leipzig Law Professor's Home (1870s–1880s)

Abstract

This description of a Leipzig law professor's home was written from the critical perspective of his own son. It illustrates how, in the decade following unification, the rising class of professionals and higher civil servants began to demonstrate their enhanced status by experimenting with more elaborate (and more expensive) styles of interior decor. The overblown effect suggested by this description was also captured by the lenses of contemporary photographers, though it was hardly unique to German interiors of the day.

Source

In this state of mind, I sat down one morning all by myself in the so-called hall, the large visitor's and reception room in my parents' flat. My eyes wandered over the furniture as if I had never seen it before. What kind of world did I really live in? What I saw here I didn't like; I couldn't care less about it. There were huge bulky armchairs covered with puffed-up red velvet; hanging from each corner, from each armrest, were heavy, double-frayed tassels in the same red on greasy atlas rosettes; twisted cords, double-stitched, overlaid the seams that held the fabric together. There were long, heavy curtains, with a silky sheen, embroidered with winding, spiraling, and endlessly intertwining braids and trimmings; they were only slightly gathered to the side, and once again the heavy tassels were hanging there, the double cords that held the fabric in carefully laid-out and obtrusively draped folds. Attached to the curtains was a frayed seam of little knots and tufts—little tufts and knots, endlessly recurring, from top to bottom, horizontally underneath the gathered covers, and down to the floor, where long trains spread from the windows all the way into the room. A small sofa, similar to the armchairs, covered with the same red velvet, looked more like an evenly upholstered cavetto than a piece of furniture. No one could really sit on it properly, but it was nevertheless used for that purpose. A gas chandelier, pieced together from small Renaissance motifs, was hanging from the center of the ceiling. The doors revealed mountings with Renaissance-like moldings and cornices, and golden lines adorned the jambs and framed the panels. The walls were painted in a calm, dark blue—actually beautiful; but a meandering line in a different color, awkwardly fading into itself, wandered around each panel and attempted to be classical. On each panel hung one sheet of those colored reproductions of the great wall paintings by Rafael and Michelangelo that were produced in superb quality by an English art society in those days. Set on the tables, and on small cupboards of approximately the same height, were photographs of my parents and younger siblings—my picture was very rarely visible—often in soft, colored, plush frames; and even here the decorator seemed to take precedence over everyone else. An aesthetically horrid rendition of a photograph of my sisters as children, done in watercolors—to my knowledge much admired—had a sort of place of honor on the round table before the red upholstered cavetto.

This room was certainly one of the most beautiful and probably the most tasteful of its kind among all of my parents' social acquaintances. When I was a child, I got to see other flats where the decorator had obviously reigned without restraint and had perhaps excelled at uniting two crossed short halberds with imitation brass-polished tips with a boldly gathered and creased velvet cover, thereby making a newspaper rack—this was something that I, as a boy, admired with quiet, receptive amazement. But now I well appreciate how reserved and choice ours was in every respect. Only my father's room was a more dignified, personal, and appealing realm: here the solid bookshelves dominated the walls right up to the ceiling, and the narrow spaces in between were crowded with photographs documenting his most personal memories—his friends, teachers, pupils, the interior of a church that had once triggered a

peculiar mood; here the huge, simple desk was sitting in the middle, and from the room's high back wall, filled with books, the youthful and tender marble bust of my mother looked down from the very spot, where, in other places, a small plaster Zeus of Otricoli or a martial Agamemnon gazed down upon the tender forehead of many a contemporary scholar. The room was a much more dignified, personal, and appealing realm, and when my father was absent [...] I enjoyed immersing myself in it.

Source: Rudolf Binding, *Erlebtes Leben*. Potsdam, 1937, pp. 101ff.; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870–1914. Dokumente und Skizzen*, 3rd ed. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982, pp. 339–41.

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Recommended Citation: Interior of a Leipzig Law Professor's Home (1870s–1880s), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-491>> [July 11, 2025].