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Cheap, Quick, and Easy: Imitative Architectural Materials,
1870-1930 (review)

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Cheap, Quick, and Easy: Imitative Architectural Materials, 1870–1930.

By Pamela H. Simpson. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999.

Pp. xii+215; illustrations, notes/references, bibliography, index. \$39.

The imitation of natural materials in architecture and the decorative arts is a technological achievement with interrelated cultural and economic implications. Patricia Simpson touches on all of these in *Cheap, Quick, and*

Easy. Her work takes its title, and to a certain extent its theme, from an article published in *Progressive Architecture* in 1960, a year and a venue devoted to the modernist syndrome of glassy uniformity. In that article, Ada Louise Huxtable, doyenne of socioarchitectural purity, had offered an overview of concrete construction in which she dismissed concrete block—and, by extension, imitative products in general—as the unfortunate result of American ingenuity and American tastelessness. Simpson admits the ingenuity but denies the tastelessness. Rather, she draws on a half-century of periodical and trade literature to tell readers about the “manufacture, distribution, advertising, and use” (p. 2) of these often humble products, and to consider arguments raised on their behalf as well as against them.

Using the methods of social history and material culture analysis, Simpson deals systematically with a number of building, finish, and decorative materials used in America between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the Great Depression: concrete block, sheet metal, “tin” ceilings and interior walls, linoleum, embossed wall and ceiling coverings (such as Lincrusta-Walton and Anaglypta), “compo,” imitation plasters, and artificial marbles and stone. In each case she provides historical background, surveys manufacturers and manufacturing processes, shows examples of advertising, traces economic effects, and discusses public reception. In her concern for keeping to her designated time period she occasionally elides an eighteenth-century technique, but the few such oversights are of little importance. (It is unclear, for example, whether “Adam’s New Improved Patent Stucco” [p. 10] was John Liardet’s oil-based product, patented in 1773, or the water-based product with which he had replaced it by 1779.)

Simpson is at her best when she recounts how products were fabricated, distributed, and advertised. The case of concrete block, the subject of her first chapter, is particularly arresting, in that production moved rapidly from factories to backyards; plants responded by manufacturing equipment rather than products, at least one major retailer increased trade by selling such equipment directly to consumers wishing to build for themselves, and the consumers, having completed that task, turned entrepreneurial and sold blocks to others. The account causes us to reconsider rock-face block buildings erected after the First World War, so that we interpret their homely appearance through the lens of economic populism.

The exploration of the debate surrounding imitative materials is less successful, especially when Simpson moves from the reception accorded specific products to the discussion of imitation as a genre. The problem is not that she overlooks aspects of this controversy. It is, rather, that the arguments for and against imitation—hygiene, low cost, improved performance on the one hand; a quasi-religious reverence for the “genuine” on the other—are so well known that it is difficult to reach fresh conclusions. Her presentation does underscore the elitism of the dialectic, in which an essentially classist argument was masked with references to a supposedly classless “taste.”

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If *Cheap, Quick, and Easy* has a true flaw, it is that pre-nineteenth-century attitudes toward imitative materials are mentioned rarely, and almost exclusively in the Anglo-Saxon context. Granted, authors must start somewhere; but in honoring the temporal parameters of her title, Simpson ignores more nuanced receptions. In eighteenth-century France, for example, craftsmen produced imitations to test their skill, connoisseurs evaluated them to test their expertise, and the press applauded any product that offered improved performance at lower cost. Only those that failed either to fool or to function were universally condemned. Within her selected time frame, however, Simpson overlooks nothing. In relating this largely untold history compiled from largely forgotten sources, she allows us to perceive the vigor of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America: the belief in progress; the infatuation with machinery and invention; the expanding economy; the growth of advertising; the development of consumerism in the building and decorative arts; the distrust with which each social class regarded the one below it; and the fervor of aesthetic proselytizing.

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