

Characteristics of a Gilded Age Mansion

The newly wealthy citizens of the country traced their ancestry and cultural heritage to the great civilizations and aristocracies of Europe. They looked back at the glory of the Italian Renaissance and the royal splendors of France and Great Britain for their attitudes, culture and life styles. Many people spent months visiting the great European cities as part of a "Grand Tour", collecting and moving art, architecture and fashion from Europe to the United States.

Although the initial designs and the interior decoration of their great house were influenced by European design, American architects also created a different blending of styles and added new innovations that reflected the growing technology of the times.

Some of the characteristics unique to the American gilded Age Mansion:

- central heating, developed in the 1870s, which allowed more open expanses of space in the house
- sliding doors in the walls, which allowed space to be opened or closed according to need.
- indoor plumbing
- gas lighting, which changed to electric in the 1920s
- an office, library, or den usually designed with bookshelves and a desk for the man to work from home when he wanted to or meet with male colleagues in his home.
- showers, which appeared above the bathtub after 1900
- large closets built in dressing areas adjacent to bedrooms.

Gilded Age mansions had many rooms for the family, entertainment, and living quarters for a large number of servants. Some of the general characteristics of the rooms:

- the Entrance Hall
- a dramatic aesthetic, which conveyed power and wealth.
- one or two sweeping staircases
- sculptured relief on walls and/or ceiling
- large stained glass windows or skylights
- marble walls and/or floors
- large ferns, palms or flower arrangements from the greenhouse
- a reception room(s) designed specifically for receiving guests

Rooms that could usually be found in most Gilded Age mansions:

Reception room

- designed specifically for receiving guests; sometimes separate rooms for men and women

Ballroom

- largest, most elaborate, and least used room in the house
- no furniture except for chairs around the edge of the floor
- elaborate moldings on wall and ceiling
- large crystal chandeliers as well as crystal lighting fixtures on the walls to reflect and refract light
- parquet wood floors
- abundant gilt and brocade window treatments
- large mirrors on the walls as well as painted ceilings for elegance
- a balcony for the musicians

Music Room or Picture Gallery

- skylight for better lighting
- contained paintings or tapestries; paintings were hung on top of large mirrors to allow more light on the work of art
- gilded chairs placed far from the walls for picture gazing; grouped for a musical performance.
- velvet or damask covering the walls

Dining Room

- designed for very formal occasions
- long enough to accommodate up to a hundred or more guests at one table.
- broad enough for an elaborate display of silver as well as footmen behind each chair to assist the guests
- lavish gilt and plaster molding on the wall and ceilings
- crystal chandeliers and wall sconces for elegance

Library, Den or Office

- strictly a man's room
- English paneling, period bookshelves
- comfortable overstuffed furniture
- family portraits, hunt scenes or horse paintings on the walls
- large marble carved fireplace
- large wooden desk for working while at home.

Salon

- room for ladies to talk for tea or after dinner
- generally furnished in pastels
- light wood or painted French furniture
- small tea tables and chairs for playing bridge.
- large fireplace with decorative mantel

Family Bedrooms

- bedroom, dressing room and bath for each member of the family

Upper Floors (servants' quarters)

- small simple rooms
- one row of rooms for men, one row for women servants.

General group of servants consisted of 4 chamber and parlor maids, a laundress, a linen woman to iron, scrubbing maids, a butler to oversee all the staff, at least 4 footmen, 2 males for heavy chores, one chef and 2 assistants. A maid earned about \$12 a month.