Death in the Dining Room
All people need food. About that, there is no disagreement. But when it comes to defining food, opinions differ. What is edible in one society is inedible in another. What is invested with sacred properties or elevated to ceremonial status in one society is taboo in another. Within our own society, some potential foods evoke positive feelings and associations; others provoke disgust and revulsion. Much the same can be said for the etiquettes and environments associated with eating. This chapter is about an environment that contemporary Americans find unacceptably violent and sensual. Their negative reactions to this small fragment of the Victorian material world demonstrate how greatly cultural attitudes and values have changed in a relatively short time. They also suggest that this environment provides access to a side of Victorian culture not usually explored in studies of domestic life, a side our culture finds problematic and disturbing. Perhaps more than any other objects in this book, this environment and the furnishings designed for it complicate our comprehension of Victorian life. Perhaps more than any others, they force us to ponder the ways Victorians were not like us.

There is no accepted name for the phenomenon we examine in this chapter. We could accurately, if not gracefully, call it the mid-nineteenth-century iconography of dining. This iconography is identified and defined by two- and three-dimensional representations of fruits, vegetables, grains, and nuts; of dead rabbits, deer and other mammals, fish, and fowl; of trophies and instruments of the hunt, harvest, and vintage; and of related allegorical figures. My purpose here is not to write a history of this iconography. That would be an immense task, for its roots reach far back in time, to the caves of Lascaux and even beyond to the earliest experiences of humankind. Instead, I want, first, to resurrect for twentieth-century eyes an underacknowledged aspect of Victorian material culture that was both highly visible and significant in its own day. Second, I want to suggest how we might interpret these assertive and expressive goods, these undeniably affecting presences of the Victorian world.

The imagery I have outlined appeared in greatest concentration on sideboards, the most prominent pieces of furniture in nineteenth-century dining rooms (2.1).
2.1 The sideboard was a dominant presence in the dining rooms of affluent Americans who furnished in the 1850s. This lavishly carved example represented the high end of furniture production of the time. Not only was the design European but the execution probably was as well; elaborately carved furniture of this quality was usually the work of French or German immigrant artisans who settled in major metropolitan areas. All the naturalistic imagery was carved from wood, with the exception of the antlers, which were the real thing. Overall height, nearly 8 feet (92 inches).

Walnut sideboard with marble slab
Probably Boston, c. 1855
Currier Gallery of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire
Gift of Mrs. Francis MacKay, Accession No. 1981.50
Elements of the imagery were incorporated into the design of French sideboards of the 1840s, but the prime object, the seminal expression of the genre, was an immense walnut sideboard exhibited at the Crystal Palace in London in 1851. This sideboard, at least 12 feet high, was produced by the Parisian firm of Fourdinois. Although now lost, the object was extensively described and illustrated in its day, and its features are therefore fairly well known (2.2). Much of the surface of this sideboard was devoted to an elaborated iconographic program of dining. At the base were six dogs, symbolizing the hunt. Onto a large slab above them tumbled a naturalistically carved deer, game bird, and lobster. Flanking this central composition were panels and roundels of produce. On pedestals above stood female figures representing four continents with what were considered their most celebrated contributions to foodways: Europe with wine, Asia with tea, Africa with coffee, and America with sugar cane. Above these figures were trios of putti harvesting wheat and grapes. The upper center of the piece was dominated by a painting of an aloe or century plant (2.3). The entire design culminated in the seated figure of Ceres presenting two cornucopias.

The Fourdinois sideboard occupied and fused two separate design tracks: object-function and ornament. Within the first, it played a key role in the development of the sideboard as a distinctive furniture form. At the middle of the nineteenth century, the sideboard was simultaneously an ancient and a modern object. It was ancient in the sense that case pieces of some sort had been part of the physical context of affluent dining in the West since at least the fifteenth century. These case pieces usually provided some combination of storage and display. The sideboard was also modern in the sense that the sequence to which the Fourdinois example belonged dated only to the late eighteenth century. At that time, many furniture forms were reconceptualized, the sideboard among them. In Britain and France in particular, new arrangements of storage and display functions were articulated. From new beginnings in the 1770s to the middle of the nineteenth century, the lines of sideboard development are quite clear, at least at the level of elite culture.
The most authoritative statement in furniture of the mid-nineteenth-century iconography of dining, this immense walnut sideboard was exhibited at the Great Exhibition in London in 1851. Its image was widely disseminated through the many publications that recorded Joseph Paxton's famous Crystal Palace and objects shown in it. Although the Great Exhibition celebrated Britain's economic and political power, the success of the Fourdinois sideboard demonstrated that France still exercised leadership in the arts of elegant living.

Prize-winning walnut sideboard
A. G. Fourdinois, Paris, 1851
Illustrated in The Art Journal Illustrated Catalogue: The Industry of All Nations
London: George Virtue for The Art Journal, 1851
The Winterthur Library
The Fourdinios sideboard was a prime object in part because of the success with which it resolved the issue of what a sideboard should be around 1850. That resolution stressed the functions of presentation and display over storage. The Fourdinios sideboard was notable for how little interior space it provided. Because the object does not survive and therefore cannot be examined, it is difficult to be certain, but the Fourdinios sideboard seems to have had no interior spaces at all, except for a row of shallow drawers in the frieze above the seated dogs. While the long horizontal slab could be used for display, the primary function of this sideboard was presentation of itself; that is, of its form and iconography. Its prime object status and the high regard in which it was held in its day rested in part on its power to demonstrate the cultural ideal that consummate objects expressed themselves. Utilitarian functions were subordinate to social, symbolic, or ideological functions. Because for most people household furniture was necessarily utilitarian to some degree, this ideal was rarely attained. As an exhibition piece, however, the Fourdinios sideboard was free from the practical constraints of daily life. It could transcend the limitations of the mundane.

The Fourdinios sideboard was a prime object also because of its ornament, the iconography lathered so luxuriantly across its expansive surface. While the composition was original and innovative, most of the individual components of the composition had long been familiar. The theme of abundant food was popular in paintings produced in the Low Countries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and in France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. References to hunting or foodways were used in Rococo compositions by designers such as Antoine Watteau, Christophe Huet, Jean-Baptiste Oudry, and others, and had been stock elements of ornemanistes since the sixteenth century. In the eighteenth century, Parisian townhouses were furnished with carved or painted images of dead game in rooms where dining took place. A thorough survey of design history would locate abundant examples of this kind of imagery.

We can get some idea of how innovative the Fourdinios sideboard was by comparing it with another sideboard that had been publicly exhibited in Paris in 1844 (2.4).
2.4 The iconography emerges. This sideboard, exhibited in Paris in 1844, possesses in rudimentary form many of the elements that would be more fully exploited seven years later by Fourdinois. These include the clusters of dead game on the doors, the vicious-looking animal heads terminating the scrolls supporting the shelf, and, more visible in the detail, the stylized representation of dogs hunting a stag in the cartouche at the top.

Oak sideboard in the Renaissance style
Manufactured by Ringuet Leprieur, Paris
From Le Carde-meuble album de l'exposition de l'Industrie, 1844
Paris: D. Guilmard, 1844
Grand Rapids Public Library, Michigan
This earlier object contained some of the same ingredients but they were handled in a much less assertive way. The piece consequently had much less dramatic impact. The Fourdinois sideboard significantly magnified both scale and complexity. The earlier sideboard had sketched out a rudimentary iconography of hunting and foodstuffs; the Fourdinois sideboard expanded, elaborated, and embellished that iconography. Variations on the 1844 formulation remained typical until 1851, when the Fourdinois sideboard radically elevated and transformed the idiom.

Although exhibited in London’s Crystal Palace in 1851, the Fourdinois sideboard was a product of continuing French design hegemony. It was a noteworthy achievement in a long line of noteworthy French achievements. Centuries of royal and state support for the arts of gracious living had helped make France the international center of courtly design. And while French political power was clearly waning, France’s cultural authority was still strong. For many people, the mere fact that this object was French gave it cachet. Its selection for a top award by an international panel of judges demonstrated that the French still could not be surpassed in the courtly arts.\(^\text{10}\)

As a prime object supported by the cultural power of France, the Fourdinois sideboard generated replications—and replications of those replications—throughout the Western world for well over two decades. Some of them were shown at subsequent world’s fairs. At the Centennial International Exhibition, held in Philadelphia in 1876, the German and Spanish sections (2.5) exhibited massive sideboards that were still paying homage to the prototype.\(^\text{11}\)

Sideboards were particularly prominent around the middle of the century. In Britain, there was something of a sideboard mania. Hughes Protat, who had designed the Fourdinois sideboard of 1851, was employed in 1853 to design for a country house in Warwickshire another sideboard with similar iconography but laid out in the more horizontal British manner. In the same shire, a few years later, J. M. Willcox produced a highly sculptural sideboard for Charlecotte Park, where it is still on view. Some of the prominent sideboards of the 1850s and 1860s were based on British literature or lore. The most famous of these were probably the Kenil-
2.5 French international design hegemony. Made in Spain and exhibited in Philadelphia, this sideboard documents the authority of French design ideas. Without the caption, "Spanish Buffet," and the Damascus-style metalwork below, there would be little reason to think this object was not French, or American in the French style, rather than Spanish in the French style. This object and the many others like it produced throughout the Western world are evidence of an international cosmopolitan style that dominated courtly taste in the nineteenth century, as it had in the eighteenth.

Spanish sideboard exhibited at the Centennial International Exhibition in Philadelphia, 1876
Illustrated in George Titus Ferris, Gems of the Centennial
New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1877
The Winterthur Library
worth sideboard, produced by the Warwick firm of Cookes, and the Chevy Chase sideboard, made by Gerrard Robinson of Newcastle.12

The Fourdinois sideboard was swiftly replicated in the United States. In 1853, New York City hosted an international exhibition. Although smaller than the London fair, it too was housed in a Crystal Palace and included exhibits from around the world. The most prominent piece of furniture, if we can judge from the leading catalog of the exhibition, was a massive sideboard loosely modeled on the Fourdinois example. It was exhibited by a New York firm identified as Bulkley & Herter (2.6). Bulkley is unknown today, but Gustave Herter and his brother Christian went on to become leading names in furniture and interior design in the 1870s and 1880s. The sideboard, or “buffet,” exhibited by this firm in 1853 was described in the catalog as “truly magnificent,” a “noble work,” “large in size” and “grand in style.” It was illustrated in its entirety on one page and in seven details on the facing page, one of which is shown in Figure 2.7.13

The Bulkley & Herter sideboard was not a conventional piece of household furniture. Like the Fourdinois example, it was a specially created exhibition piece, intended to impress with its quality of design and workmanship and great scale. Other sideboards shown in 1853 were more typical of objects in production, albeit at the top of the line. Alexander Roux of New York, already a well-known French immigrant cabinetmaker, exhibited a sideboard (2.8) described in the catalog as “not too large for the use and style of moderately wealthy families.”14 Twentieth-century folk could have made the same pronouncement by analyzing the artifactual record. The Roux sideboard was a fairly standard example of upscale production. Scores of similar and even more elaborate pieces survive today to demonstrate that they were once numerous. Outstanding examples are in the collections of the Currier Gallery of Art in New Hampshire (see 2.1), Yale University Art Gallery (2.9), the High Museum in Atlanta, and the Cleveland Museum of Art (2.10). All follow what seems to have been the prevailing scheme for expensive sideboards. The base of each was divided into four units, all defined by doors. The two center doors were flat; the flanking doors convex. All were adorned with high-relief carving of appro-
2.6 A blockbuster sideboard for the American Crystal Palace in 1853. Like its English model, the New York City international exhibition was housed in a bold and innovative glass structure and included an exceptional sideboard that attracted considerable attention. More than any other example of the period, this piece blurred the distinction between furniture and architecture, introducing design allusions to a chapel and altar into an object presumably intended for a domestic dining room.

Sideboard by Bulkeley & Herter exhibited at the New York Crystal Palace in 1853
Illustrated in Benjamin Silliman and C.R. Goodrich, eds., The World of Science, Art and Industry Illustrated
New York: G. P. Putnam & Co., 1854
2.7 A rare instance of violence. Most sideboards presented the outcome or aftermath of violence, rather than scenes of actual death or dying. But Bulkley & Herter prominently placed a scene Silliman and Goodrich described as "The Death of the Stag" as the focal point of their intensely altarlike sideboard.

"The Death of the Stag"
Carved centerpiece of the Bulkley & Herter sideboard

2.8 The basic sideboard of affluent Americans of the 1850s. This example, manufactured in New York by the firm of French-trained immigrant Alexander Roux, is typical of expensive production. The four-unit base with curved ends and the three-stage back are recurring elements. This rather staid sideboard owes less to the Fourdinois tour de force of 1851 than to the sideboard illustrated in Figure 2.4. Scores of similar sideboards still survive.

Sideboard by Alexander Roux exhibited at the New York Crystal Palace in 1853
Illustrated in Benjamin Silliman and C. R. Goodrich, eds., The World of Science, Art and Industry Illustrated
New York: G. P. Putnam & Co., 1854
2.9 This sideboard, by an unknown firm, closely resembles several exhibited at the New York Crystal Palace.

Black walnut sideboard
Probably made in New York, c. 1853
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven
Jos. Earl Sheffield Collection
Height 102"
One of the most elaborate American sideboards from the 1850s, this lavishly carved example adroitly manipulates key elements of French-derived design vocabulary, even nationalizing the design through the addition of a pair of Native American hunters. Like other very heavily ornamented sideboards, this one allows little surface for the display of other objects. Its major display is of itself.

Walnut sideboard with marble top
Possibly made in Philadelphia, c. 1855
Cleveland Museum of Art, Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund, 85.72
Height 114"
appropriate imagery. Above the doors were drawers; two were flat and two convex. A large horizontal slab, of either wood or marble, provided a surface for display and visually terminated the lower section.

On this lower section of four units rested an upper section of three units. Conceptually, the central pier or dividing element of the lower section was eliminated in the upper in order to create a broader expanse. The three examples shown here display varying treatments of this basic formula. They also demonstrate the alternatives for the crest on top of the piece. Some combination of pediments, scrolls, cartouches, and stag’s head were typical.

Wood engravings in exhibition catalogs, however detailed and accurate, provide little clue to the visual impact of these sideboards. Seeing these massive and aggressive objects firsthand in domestic settings or art museums is a memorable experience. Their large-scale, high-quality workmanship, and, above all, explicit imagery, make them powerful, assertive, even commanding. All the examples listed here repay careful examination. The Cleveland Museum of Art’s sideboard provides a particularly rich sculptural program. Figures of Native American hunters (2.11) flank a roundel filled with fruits and vegetables (2.12). Above the roundel is a vigorous sculpture of dead game (2.13), clearly derived in its conception from the Fourdinois sideboard of 1851. The entire design is crowned with an impressionistically carved hawk holding a bird it has just caught and is about to devour (2.14).

The most lavishly decorated midcentury sideboard currently on public view is owned, perhaps appropriately, by the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston (2.15). Laid out according to an alternative scheme of a three-part base, all but a few surfaces of this sideboard are densely covered with exceptional carving. On the center door are trophies of the hunt, including a gun, pouch, powder horn, and hunting bugle, bound to oak branches by a crinkled ribbon (2.16). On the left door is a seafood medley, composed of two fish, an eel, and a lobster, all garnished with cattails and bound by another ribbon (2.17). The right panel is ornamented with gamebirds in similar fashion (2.18).
2.12 A composition of selected produce. There may be meaning in the fact that all the foods depicted are associated with plant reproduction. Fruits, nuts, berries, grapes, melon, corn, peas, and the pineapple either are seeds or contain them. This carved imagery, then, perpetuates long-standing conventions of fertility and abundance. For if flowers offer the possibility of sexual union and fertilization, fruits are evidence that both have taken place.

Detail of walnut sideboard shown in Figure 2.10
Photograph courtesy of Peter Hill, Inc.

2.13 The dead stag and other victims of predation carved in black walnut, the wood used for furniture masterpieces of the French Renaissance of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Within a shallow niche, the prototypical dead stag is joined by two game birds and a rabbit, the whole composition unified and contextualized through naturalistically carved branches, vines, and grasses. The architectural frame for this intensely sculptural composition is further enriched with naturalistic touches, making it clear that artifice controls nature and nature ornaments artifact.

Detail of walnut sideboard shown in Figure 2.10
Photograph courtesy of Peter Hill, Inc.
2.14 Where do predation and death come from? Sometimes they swoop down from above, catching their victims by surprise. This extraordinary sideboard culminates in an image of a bird of prey and its catch, an image that can be interpreted literally and in more metaphoric terms. The carving is not minutely detailed, but evokes plant and bird forms through the loosely handled, impressionistic style admired at the time.

Detail of walnut sideboard shown in Figure 2.10
Photograph courtesy of Peter Hill, Inc.
2.15 More carving per square inch than any other mid-nineteenth-century sideboard in the public domain. One of the most startling artistic accomplishments of Victorian America, this densely ornamented sideboard presents a rich and intricate synopsis of the major features of the iconography of dining. The entire composition and its complex web of meanings and associations are nationalized and endorsed by the American bald eagle and shield at the top. The introduction of the American emblem and totem commingles natural order with national order, natural predation with national predation.

Carved walnut sideboard
Made in a major East Coast city, c. 1853
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Museum Purchase with funds provided by
Anatir and Aron S. Gordon
Photograph courtesy of Peter Hill, Inc.
Height 106"
Elaborate as it is, the base of the object seems sparsely decorated when we turn to the upper section, which presents an intricate composition of hunting dogs (2.19), fox heads, small mammals, and seemingly endless naturalistic, Mannerist, and Baroque forms. The largest and most assertive section depicts a dead stag hanging head downward, one leg bound by a rope fastened through the scrolls of a foliate cartouche (2.20). Like the Cleveland example, the whole design is capped by a bird of prey. Here, however, the bird of prey is an eagle grasping, not a victim, but a shield emblazoned with the stars and stripes. A European design concept has been explicitly Americanized.
2.19 As in the Fourdinois sideboard, dogs serve here not only to sustain the reference to hunting but to support and guard display surfaces. Unarguably animals, in the hunt dogs act as human agents and serve human purposes. Dogs might be described as the soldiers of fortune of the animal world.

Carved dogs, parts of a carved walnut sideboard shown in Figure 2.15
Photograph courtesy of Peter Hill, Inc.
2.20 The ritual sacrifice of the stag. The designer of this sideboard drew on venerable traditions in crafting the ceremonial centerpiece of this extraordinary sideboard. The captured stag, bound by one foot, hangs head downward in front of an aedicule, a doorwaylike or arklike form long used to convey significance on objects or figures placed within it. By being located within this canopied architectural form, this little temple, this shrine, the stag becomes sacralized. On the facades of Gothic cathedrals and in Renaissance paintings, saints stood within similar honorific and symbolic structures.

Carved stag, centerpiece of walnut sideboard shown in Figure 2.13. Photograph courtesy of Peter Hill, Inc.
These sideboards represented a highly visible cultural phenomenon around the middle years of the nineteenth century. Originating in France and empowered by French cultural authority, the concept was widely and swiftly emulated. For nearly two decades, sideboards such as these were prominent at international exhibitions. Surviving examples allow us to experience their powerful presence. While they induce in us a certain degree of awe, we tend to see them as alien, foreign, decidedly odd. On one level, they are fascinating; on another, slightly repulsive. Today it is difficult for many to believe that normal, well-socialized people in Victorian America voluntarily put these boldly expressive objects in their dining rooms and ate daily in their presence. Evidence suggests that Victorians not only tolerated these objects but found them desirable. We wonder why. What did these sideboards mean to them? How are we to interpret them?

First, they have meaning purely as sideboards. If we strip away the lavish carving, we still must contend with the form and, even more, the immense scale of these objects. Even after the midcentury iconography of dining was out of fashion, sideboards remained large and imposing. Part of their significance as sideboards was related to the process of specialization that restructured nineteenth-century domestic life. Begun earlier at the courtly level, this specialization required that each room have its discrete functions and that these functions be articulated and enabled by the furnishings in that space. Put into practice, this usually meant that in homes of affluent people, the distinctive function of each room was signaled by equally distinctive decor. It often turned out that in each room one object was especially magnified, as if to take lead responsibility for defining the function of that space. In the hall it was the hallstand; in the dining room, the sideboard.

Like hallstands, sideboards glorified the functions that took place in their presence and contributed to the self-consciousness of their users. Like hallstands, sideboards were large precisely because dining was understood to be of extraordinary significance. To nineteenth-century minds, dining was important because it was basic and because it simultaneously provided an occasion for the display of highly civilized behavior. Here was a charged, even sublime set of realizations. Eat-
ing linked nineteenth-century people to all people, of every time and place. Taken one step further, it also linked them to all living things, past or present, that were known to eat—or be eaten. Transforming the commonplace and even bestial act of eating into the civilized ceremony of dining elevated Victorians above all other creatures and most other human beings. These were large ideas, powerful realizations, and they deserved appropriate artifactual recognition.  

Yet clearly what stands out to, and offends, twentieth-century eyes is less the size of these objects than their explicit and highly sensual references to foods of all kinds and, above all, to dead animals. I do not intend to determine why these naturalistic carvings of dead rabbits, fish, or deer offend twentieth-century sensibilities, intriguing though the question may be. My goal is to figure out why such imagery seems to have engaged people in the 1850s and 1860s.

Some of the answer may be found in attitudes toward violence, a prime ingredient of the Romanticism of the last century. Violence pervaded literature and design. The imagery on sideboards has many close cognates in contemporary artistic expression. In France, at about the same time that the Fourdinois sideboard was being designed, Eugene Delacroix was painting some of his most violent, most Romantic lion hunts, tiger hunts, and other exoticized scenes of predation (2.21). At that time, too, Antoine Louis Barye was crafting his small but intensely powerful bronzes of lions, bears, pythons, and other carnivores locked in deadly combat (2.22). In Britain, Sir Edwin Landseer was painting stag hunts and other well-received scenes of animal conflict (2.23). These were only the most visible participants in a far broader phenomenon.

But these were, as I have suggested, only close cognates. Compared to the work of Delacroix, Barye, and Landseer, the images on sideboards seem tame and subdued, the violence occurring offstage, so to speak. With rare exception, the creatures on sideboards are dead, rather than engaged in fatal struggles. These carved wooden images, then, are not meant to evoke the same excitement or passion as the scenes of conflict. Nor are they presentations of gratuitous violence. Their meanings are more subtle and more complex.
2.21 Violence and aggression exotized. For nineteenth-century Europeans, the Islamic world constituted a major “other,” a world against which Europeans defined and measured themselves and onto which they projected their fantasies. This swirling and unlikely scene of vicarious combat was created by a privileged Parisian painter. Within a barren and unnamed landscape, wild, colorful, exotic, and terrifying animals struggle with people most Parisians probably would have defined in similar terms.

The Lion Hunt
Eugène Delacroix, 1860–1861
Oil on canvas
Courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago
Mr. and Mrs. Potter Palmer Collection, 1922.404
Photograph copyright 1990, The Art Institute of Chicago. All Rights Reserved.

2.22 The violence of nature. The naturalness of violence. Or so it might seem. But Barye’s small and powerful bronzes often bring together in deadly struggle two species that either do not normally interact or are not normally enemies. Thus Barye’s own proclivity toward violence, and that of the larger society around him, become problematized. This sculpture is less about the violence characteristic of the animal world than about the violence that marks human relationships, the violence that lurks just behind most human beings’ “civilized” facades, and the particular potential for violence that seethes within males of the species.

Lion with Foot on Serpent
Bronze sculpture by Antoine Louis Barye, 1851
Philadelphia Museum of Art, W. P. Wilstach Collection
Photograph by A. J. Wyatt, Staff Photographer
The stag hunt was a familiar image and concept in the nineteenth century and was rendered in many media. This version was painted by an artist better known for creating that enduring icon of animal nobility, the famous Monarch of the Glen, still used in the advertising of a major insurance company. This scene, if less famous, is more typical of midcentury attitudes toward the animal world.

The Hunted Stag
Sir Edwin Landseer, before 1833
Oil on canvas
The Tate Gallery, London
They seem to be, for one thing, statements about the relationship of humankind to the natural world, expressing and endorsing a highly human-centered vision. The repeated depiction of bountiful displays suggests that the entire produce of the world was understood to be at humanity’s service. Most of the animals, fruits, and vegetables on American sideboards seem to have been indigenous, but the Cleveland sideboard clearly depicts a pineapple, suggesting a wider purview (see 2.12). The Fourdinois sideboard was the fullest expression of what might be called alimentary imperialism, with its allegorical representations of four continents and representative products (see 2.2).21

These sideboards reaffirmed an ancient view, recorded as far back as the Book of Genesis, that humankind should have dominion “over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.”22 These objects expressed that enduring comprehension in wholly secular terms, yet religious underpinnings, not usually visible, gave added resonance to their pronouncements.

Here again, the Fourdinois sideboard, perhaps because it was the most elaborated expression of this mode, provides the most insights. As noted, the Fourdinois sideboard culminated in a figure of the Roman goddess Ceres flanked by putti, those on one side harvesting wheat, the others harvesting grapes. These references seem universal, alluding to all food and drink, yet specific, suggesting the staples of French foodways, bread and wine. Yet bread and wine are basic to many other foodways as well, and for that reason central to the Christian ritual sacrifice of the Mass. This association could not have been lost on nineteenth-century observers, nor could they have failed to note, as have many in the twentieth century, that a large number of these sideboards strongly resemble the altarpieces of Catholic churches. Sideboards seem to be altars of profusion, abundance, prosperity, plenty. In a secular view undergirded by religious texts and allusions, these objects celebrated the sacrifice of “every creeping thing” in the service of humankind.

Celebration of sacrifice is one way of defining the meaning of these objects. Celebration of predation may be another, more skeptical way of describing it. Death on
these sideboards has not simply happened; it has been brought about by agents. Where those agents are identified, they include animals, putti, or figures in historic or exotic garb. Predation expressed in this form was simultaneously muted and transformed into symbol and ceremony. Hounds attacking a stag, Native American hunters, or putti are all “natural” (or supernatural) and outside the normal daily experience of “civilized” Parisians and urban Americans. Even the hunting attributes on the central panel of the extravagant Houston sideboard (see 2.15) only imply a human agent. As far as I know, no figures of nineteenth-century Europeans or European Americans appear on any of these sideboards. Although the figures that do appear are naturalistically rendered, because they are remote from experience, violence is also made remote, or abstract, and therefore more acceptable. In fact, instead of violence itself, we witness the outcome of violence. Often the animals look more asleep than dead. They are artfully arranged and balanced. There are no mangled, twisted bodies, no partially dismembered or devoured corpses. We are in the realm of symbol and symbolic language here. The more closely we examine this “natural” composition, the more self-consciously artificial it becomes. This elevated, artful presentation of ends coupled with the concealed, understatement of means sets up a dynamic tension between ends and means, effects and causes, repose and action, safety and danger, purity and defilement, art and life, and finally death and life—and life and death.

Although actual scenes of death are not common, and although we are more likely to encounter images of the dead than the dying, these objects still celebrate and enshrine predatory activity. Expressed in naturalistic terms, this predation seems part of the natural order, simply the way things are. We have to wonder, however, if the celebration of predatory activity is confined to human assaults on the edible inhabitants of the natural world or whether these sideboards were also conscious metaphors of Western social patterns around the middle of the century. “Conscious” may be the key word here. Intentions are difficult to demonstrate. Predation was surely a major theme of Western society in the nineteenth century. Perhaps it is enough to suggest that these objects celebrate a predatory impulse that was at the very heart
of nineteenth-century society and that this impulse found major expression in two other broad areas of behavior. First, it sustained the wide range of human depredations of the natural world. However else these may be interpreted, the continuing rape of the landscape, the unthinking slaughter of creatures and extermination of species, and the short-sighted consumption of nonrenewable resources, in short, the consistent elevation of economic and stereotypical masculine values above all others, were all grounded in a predatory mentality. Second, this predatory mentality was incorporated into social structure and a culture that allowed powerful people to prey, not only on the animal world, but on members of their own species. In its most dramatic form, this meant colonization. In only slightly less dramatic form, it meant control of capital and labor. If these sideboards were artifacts of the age of Delacroix, Barye, and Landseer, they also belonged to the world of Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx. Exploitation of the natural world and exploitation of labor are related behaviors, grounded in the same values, the same hubris. Men were still hunters, but their predatory activity took place within the allegedly civilized world of business, industry, and national expansion. Mark Twain recognized the dubious claims of civilization and expressed in Huckleberry Finn a critique of the ascent of man. Just as Huck gave up his wild ways to become civilized and join Tom’s band of robbers, nineteenth-century capitalists relinquished their struggles with the animal world to become civilized and prey instead on their fellow human beings.24

Yet predation is hardly the only theme or association of these complicated and assertive objects. It is difficult, for example, to speak of predation without also speaking of gender, of conventional Victorian understandings of what masculinity was all about. According to Victorian stereotypes of masculinity, stereotypes still widely held today, these sideboards would have been considered masculine.25 They were masculine in the roles they played, the functions they performed. These sideboards enshrined the conventional masculine roles of hunter and provider. In the nineteenth century, provider might have been understood as a culturally created role, but man as hunter was considered as inseparable from certain conceptions of “natural” masculinity as it is today. Men are supposed to hunt. Men are sup-
posed to kill. Sideboards with dead game and hunting trophies could only be male. But style as well as content were interpreted as masculine in these objects. These sideboards were masculine because they were bold, strong, forceful, assertive, aggressive. They had a powerful and commanding presence. In the Victorian mental inventory of gender attributes, all this added up to masculine goods. Few pieces of household furniture have been as clearly or as emphatically masculine since.

As early as the 1840s, references to stag hunts appeared on sideboards. It is obvious that these endorse pursuit, predation, and human domination of the animal world. It may be less obvious that they carry class allusions as well. These class allusions may be obscured by historical and cultural differences between Europe and America. In both regions, the stag holds a privileged position among the hunted. Its high valuation rests in part on what might be called aesthetic factors and in part on mythic and mystical associations. In Europe, these associations were augmented by the identification of deer hunting with royal prerogative. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, deer were kept in royal game preserves. In later years, the wealthy had deer parks. Throughout, the possession of deer and the right to hunt them were identified with royalty, power, status (2.24). While some of these allusions may have been lost or altered in the land of the Deerslayer, in Europe the presence of the stag or the stag hunt on these sideboards indicated their links to the courtly vision of the ideal life. The courtly references on sideboards were consistent with the pattern prevailing at mid-century. For much of white, urbane Western society, the vision of the good life was derived largely from European monarchical and aristocratic lifestyles of the past. Yet these objects bear a curious relationship to their courtly antecedents. The reference to the stag hunt may have been considered necessary at the time to give these objects courtly associations, for while mid-century sideboards incorporated historical design vocabulary, their form did not replicate any known historical modes. Although courtly in scale, presence, and cost, they also departed from historical precedent in their heightened and unequivocal allusions to stereotypical masculine associations and values. In short, the nineteenth century did not
The royal prerogative of the deer hunt, transferred to an American context. In this imaginative image from the mid-nineteenth century, America's uncrowned monarch rests as his catch is being weighed, while Martha, alias Jean Étienne Liotard's La Belle Chocolatière, enters bearing refreshments. Here, key figures of the eighteenth century are reconfigured into a dramatic vignette understandable to and congruent with Victorian taste and values. The image also suggests that the hunt, the dead stag, and the meal all had latent sexual dimensions that later Victorians repressed. George's eyes are not on the stag, but on Martha as she brings drink to supplement the meat he has provided. If money is an aphrodisiac in the twentieth century, an abundance of food—money expressed in more immediately sensual terms—was an aphrodisiac in earlier times. This erotic aspect was potentially heightened when the food was obtained by hunting, understood as a ritual affirmation of masculinity.

Home from the Hunt
Engraving by Henry Bryan Hall after A. Henning, 1855
Courtesy of Fraunces Tavern Museum, New York
attempt to replay or relive the past but to interact with and draw from it, much as it did with the natural world.

When sideboards appeared at international exhibitions or were illustrated in trade catalogs, they usually stood alone, in isolation. Neither function nor physical context was indicated. But sideboards were intended for dining rooms. There, they provided a theatrical backdrop for the ritual of dining. During the meal, bottles of wine, bowls of vegetables, and platters of meat were often placed on them. In these situations of actual use, another set of meanings emerged. Much as the iconography of the piece and its use by elite society played on the continuum and dissonance of savagery and civilization, sideboards in use revealed the dialectic between the raw, depicted on the sideboard, and the cooked, presented in the meal. Humankind was the agent for the transformation from the raw to the cooked, from natural to artificial, from nature to artifact. Civilization could be in part demonstrated at a meal by the number of these transformations and the distance between the two poles. Raw was a fixed category, but the cooked could be elevated and embellished to exquisite levels of subtlety, delicacy, and refinement.\(^{27}\)

The nineteenth-century ritual of dining has been capably discussed elsewhere.\(^{28}\) Here I want to underline, not the structure or organization of the meal, but its ritualistic dimension. Rituals are deliberately repeated acts or events that order and control. Rituals reaffirm cosmology, assure people of the way things ought to be.\(^{29}\) Many human activities, however seemingly ordinary or bizarre, can be ritualized; consider those that took place in nineteenth-century halls. The ritualization of eating, however, is commonplace. Eating is a core component of the rituals of many societies. Across the anthropological and historical record, people have created eating rituals to initiate and maintain human relationships. In Victorian America, a dinner was also at some level a ritual of bonding. Eating the same foods from matching dishes with matching silverware bound diners to one another in one set of ways. Dining in the presence of the sideboard, and therefore absorbing and endorsing the cluster of cultural values expressed on it, bound them in another. As they dined, they sat in the presence of a rich and intricate nonverbal text that spoke
of the struggle for existence and the subordination of groups to other groups; of the interrelatedness of all living things; of order, hierarchy, domination, and survival; of history and progress; power and gender; of the inescapable truth that some must die for others to live. As they dined they affirmed the truism that life depends on death.30

These remarkable sideboards were products of the time of Delacroix, Barye, and Landseer, of Engels and Marx, and, of course, of Charles Darwin. I have held until last the name many would have listed first in order to propose that the conventional ordering may not be quite accurate and to suggest, as do these sideboards, the interrelatedness of cultural behaviors and ideas. It is important to recognize that these objects antedate Darwin’s major publications. Although their messages are sometimes ambivalent, they demonstrate without ambivalence the period’s heightened attention to natural order. The sideboards are not Darwinian texts in another medium. They are evidence that the society in which Darwin and others worked was alive with questions and assertions about hierarchy, dominance, progress, and the relationship of humankind to the rest of the world, present and past.

Sideboards, particularly those shown at international exhibitions, presented the most assertive and startling examples of the mid-century iconography of dining. But they were by no means the only examples of that manner. Similar designs were widely used in association with food and dining. The iconography could on occasion be spread around an entire dining room. One of the best surviving examples of this decor is in the Henry Lippitt House in Providence, Rhode Island. There, between 1863 and 1865, a highly fashionable dining room was installed. Furnishings included a sideboard, side table, dining chairs, dining table, lounge, and mantle, all en suite and all ornamented with appropriate imagery. The walls were hung with a variety of still-life paintings that underlined and reiterated the basic themes of bounty and domination. Other houses around the country retain woodwork, ceiling paintings, etched glass, or other architectural elements embellished with this once widespread imagery.31

French design books of the nineteenth century included suggestions for dining room chimney-piece paintings of stag hunts and window shades adorned with images
2.25 Spreading the iconography around the room. This image, from a French collection of designs for window treatments, shows a window shade with decoration appropriate for a dining room. The balustrade with pot of flowers and the benign landscape in the background are generic, but the assortment of fruit and the jug of wine in the foreground give the image dining room specificity. The window cornice, garnished with a cluster of fruit, is “in keeping,” as they would have said in the period.

Design for a dining room window
From Le Garde Meuble Collection de Tentures
Bibliothèque Forney, Paris

of fruits and vegetables (2.25). Wallpapers suitable for dining rooms were also manufactured. The most lavish of these were French. One notable example depicted a stag hunt. Another pattern, known as “Décor Chasse et Pêche,” displayed a complicated pseudo-architectural setting with illusionistic wall brackets supporting stag hunts, a fox killing a fowl, wild boar hunts, fishing allegories, and other relevant imagery, all treated in a vigorous neo-Renaissance style (2.26 and 2.27).

By far the most prevalent instances of this imagery, however, were still-life paintings and prints. Prints were more numerous, for they were mass produced and inexpensive, while paintings were handmade and more costly. We are so familiar with paintings hanging in art museums that it is easy to forget that most were originally purchased for other settings. Still lifes, according to the conventions of the period, were usually considered dining room pictures. Prints of still-life themes were
2.26 One of the most extraordinary dining room wallpapers, produced, appropriately enough, by a major French manufacturer. Like the famous Fourdrinon sideboard, the iconography extends throughout most elements of the design. In the horizontal panels at the top, putti dangle dead birds before hunting dogs. These panels alternate with images of predatory birds with dead rabbits. Each of the illusionistic piers is adorned with trophies of dead game and supports allegories of hunting or fishing, posed before ceremonial niches like the dead stag on the Housden sideboard.

Wallpaper in "Décor Chasse et Pêche" pattern
Designed by Wagner
First manufactured by Lapeyre, Paris, 1846 or 1847
Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris

sometimes advertised as fruit pieces, but just as often as dining room pictures. Depictions of dining rooms, inventories, and surviving environments all demonstrate convincingly that these images were polychromatic extensions of the imagery carved on sideboards. Parallels with sideboard imagery suggest nonverbal ways in which linkages were made between paintings and sideboards. One notable feature was an emphasis on volume and density. Just as the most expensive sideboards seemed nearly to overwhelm with the sheer volume of carving, some still-life paintings were packed with foods and related utensils. Paul LaCroix’s Nature’s Bounty is emphatically bountiful (2.28). Large clusters of grapes, lush green leaves, a mixture of other fruits and nuts, and a champagne bottle and glass are pulled together in a luxurious image of abundance. A similar quality is apparent in the work of other mid-century painters in this country, most notably Severin Roesen.33
2.27 Violence on the wall. Central panel from the “Décor Chasse et Pêche” wallpaper showing the abstraction or trivialization of death through the use of putti—secular cherubs—who blow bugle horns, lead hunting dogs, and spear stags. When combined with the emphatically Mannerist design vocabulary of the illusionistic wall bracket, death becomes a decoration, a motif.

Panel of putti killing a stag
Illusionistic central panel from “Décor Chasse et Pêche” wallpaper
Designed by Wagner
First manufactured by Lapeyre, Paris, 1846 or 1847. This example produced by Desfesse et Karlth, Paris, after 1865.
Homage to the grape, the juice of the grape, and assorted fruits and berries. The architectural supports for this scene of profusion are all but invisible beneath the lush cascades of grapes and other evocations of nature’s bounty. In this image, nature predominates but is joined by and perhaps elevated by the artificial. The high degree of visibility given to the bottle and the glass suggests that champagne was understood to represent the most lofty attainment of the grape.

Nature’s Bounty
Paul LeCroix, c. 1860
Oil on canvas
From the collection of the New Britain Museum of American Art, New Britain, Connecticut
Alix W. Stanley Foundation Fund
Photograph by E. Irving Blumentann

Sometimes the subject matter of still-life paintings was nearly identical to the carved imagery on sideboards. Emanuel Leutze’s 1860 painting of dead game (2.29) seems little more than a colored, two-dimensional version of the central panel of the Fourdinois sideboard (see 2.2 and 2.3). Sometimes even the format of painted images recalled the structure of a sideboard. Many of Roesen’s fruit pictures were enclosed within oval frames, making them visual cognates to the carved doors on sideboards (2.30). A. F. Tait’s 1853 painting of dead gamebirds hanging by their feet (2.31) could have been suggested or at least reinforced by seeing carved versions of the same theme on the doors of sideboards at the New York Crystal Palace.

Outside the home, this same imagery was part of the foodways of the dominant culture. It appeared on the covers and frontispieces of cookbooks (2.32). A mid-
2.29 A painted version of the centerpiece of the Fourdinois sideboard. This composition of dead game was produced by Emanuel Leutze, better known for Washington Crossing the Delaware, Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way, The Storming of Teocalli, Mexico, and other grand and ambitious history pictures. Seen from the perspective of the middle of the nineteenth century, this scene of dead animals also dealt with a grand and sweeping theme, a theme that reached back deep into the mists of human history, a theme as mysterious and profound as life itself.

Game
Painted by Emanuel Leutze to the order of Robert L. Stuart (sugar refiner, philanthropist, and committed Presbyterian) in 1860
Oil on canvas
Courtesy of The New-York Historical Society
New York City

2.30 Why were people of the nineteenth century so infatuated with the oval frame? Oval-framed panels on sideboard doors. Oval-framed panels on book covers. Oval-framed paintings, prints, daguerreotypes. An oval frame for this fruit piece by Severin Roesen. Was it the degree of difficulty that drew admiration, or was there some metaphysical meaning to the shape itself? Whatever the underlying motivation, oval frames unified much of the pictorial world of Victorian Americans.

Fruit
Severin Roesen, 1850–1860
Oil on canvas or board
Present location unknown
Photograph, The Winterthur Museum
Paintings such as this were typically hung in the dining rooms of the wealthy, where they augmented and extended the iconography of the sideboards.

Dead Game Birds
Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait, 1853
Oil on canvas or board
Present location unknown

Courtesy Kennedy Galleries, New York

The imagery of sideboards became the imagery of foodways and cookbooks. This ornamental title page offered a Germanic version of mid-century iconography. While the fantasticized architectural setting, the bizarre shield, and the frenzied banner were self-consciously derived from German design of the sixteenth century, the arrangement of dead game, fish, and vegetables were familiar parts of a design idiom generated in France and disseminated throughout Europe and the Europeanized world.

Ornamental title page
J. Rottenhöfer, Neue vollständige theoretisch-praktische Anweisung in der leineren Kochkunst
Munich: Braun und Schneider, c. 1880
The Winterthur Library
2.33 Embossed cover of a nineteenth-century edition of one of the world’s most famous books on food. Here the raw and the cooked were laid out together in a lavish display before a figure of omnivorous humankind, the whole design conceived as a rustic-Mannerist wall bracket or ornament.

Cover design
Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, Physiologie du goût
Paris: Furne et Cie., 1864

2.34 The all-consuming human mouth and a sampling of the range of foods it devours. This whimsical visual anthology combines truth and fiction and people and foodways from far and near in a mock-serious homage to nourishment. The image is not totally random. Within the period’s preferred oval configuration, there is not only symmetry but hierarchy. Cannibals occupy the bottom of the image and the bottom of the human order. A modern chef, presumably French, occupies the top.

Les Alimens
From Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, Physiologie du goût
Paris: Furne et Cie., 1864

84 Death in the Diring Room
century edition of Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin’s *Physiologie du Goût* contained witty and humorous adaptations of the imagery, cleverly combining and juxtaposing the raw and the cooked (2.33). In the manner of the age, the book included a number of more or less allegorical plates. Some of these illuminated issues that were treated more obliquely on sideboards. In one image, entitled *Les Alimens*, a large and satisfied mouth presided over a complex composition of tiny figures engaged in delivering or producing a wide range of foods. Ironic references to struggle and survival appeared at the bottom of the page, where human legs could be seen disappearing into the mouth of a crocodile while a family of dark-skinned people chewed on the arms and legs of a European (2.34).

Dining imagery became a shorthand way of identifying restaurants. The notice of O. S. Hulbert’s Dining Hall in Rochester, New York, is fairly typical (2.35). When restaurants were put on wheels and made part of rail service, the imagery went along. The trade card for the Chicago & Northwestern Railway probably dates from the 1880s but shows that even a generation after the imagery had flourished in East Coast domestic settings, it was still useful and meaningful in other contexts (2.36).

Victorian sideboards became obsolete long ago, but another, perhaps more subtle artifact of the mid-century’s heightened attention to dining and dining rooms endures. This is the American holiday of Thanksgiving (2.37). Like many other artifacts, holidays are complex cultural creations. They are by intention coercive, manipulative. Their purpose is to interrupt the regular flow of life to focus a society’s attention on a specific set of values or at least a shared set of behaviors. They serve to enforce conformity and promote unity, solidarity, and a shared view of purpose and origins. For example, Thanksgiving has sometimes been interpreted as a symbolic expression of the North’s victory over the South in the Civil War. Thanksgiving gave primacy to New England ancestors rather than Virginian ancestors. In cosmological terms, it affirmed that America’s beginnings and its appropriate models were to be found in Puritan New England.

Thanksgiving was a relic of yet another struggle, the struggle between emerging secular views of creation and the cosmos and traditional views grounded in bib-
2.35 Dining room iconography becomes synonymous with the iconography of restaurants. Here a medley of game, fruits, oysters, wine, and other familiar forms provides a nonverbal clue to Hulbert's line of business, much as shop signs did before the age of literacy. Expensive restaurants and the dining rooms of hotels and steamboats offered levels of opulence and amounts of extravagant food that could rarely be equaled in private homes.

Advertisement for O. S. Hulbert's Dining Hall, Rochester, New York
From The New York Central Gazetteer for 1873 and 1874
Rochester: M. L. Flynn & Co., 1873
The Winterthur Library

2.36 The iconography of dining on wheels. The first railroad dining cars were conceived as mobile restaurants. Thus it is not surprising that advertising stressing the quality of railroad dining would use much the same imagery as conventional restaurants. In this trade card, a roundel in the upper left provides a glimpse of the elegantly appointed, celery-lit dining car, with its white linen, elaborately set tables, and other trappings of gentility. The rest of the image is dominated by more loosely associational imagery suggesting the abundance, variety, and freshness of the food and attentiveness to its preparation and service.

Trade card for the Chicago & Northwestern Railway
Lithographed by Heffron & Phelps, New York and Chicago, c. 1885
2.37 The imagery revised and transformed for the American holiday of Thanksgiving. This postcard provides an apparently conscious dialogue with and critique of mid-century dining imagery. Instead of the familiar convention of dead birds, feathers intact, tied with ribbon or cord and hanging head downward, the designer of this image presents a solitary turkey, plucked and naked, dangling before a nearly empty panel. The panel’s shape and the position of the turkey recall compositions on the doors of sideboards in the 1850s. Here, however, the ribbon is colored red, white, and blue and is draped about like bunting, stressing the heightened patriotic content of Thanksgiving.

“Thanksgiving Greetings” postcard
Published by A & S, postmarked Arlington, New Jersey, November 23, 1908

Lrical texts. Here the victory belonged unequivocally to the forces of tradition, for Thanksgiving institutionalized giving thanks to God in a society that was increasingly skeptical about owing God anything, if indeed there even were a God.

Thanksgiving was an effective and little-recognized manifestation of the Victorian domestic religion so capably described by Colleen McDannell. The key feature of this domestic religion was the fusion of traditional religious symbols with domestic values. The religious dimension was apparent in the expression of gratitude to the deity. On Thanksgiving Day, the “people of plenty” gave thanks for nature’s (God’s) bounty. The domestic values were manifested in the gathering of generations of family members within the home. Thanksgiving was an ideal product of this domestic religion in the way it built upon widely shared understanding of the bonding powers of a shared meal and institutionalized linkages of history, home, and church. As McDannell put it, domestic religion “bound together what was truly meaningful in Victorian society.”

In recognizing the link between Thanksgiving and domestic religion, we also recognize Victorian gender politics at work. Thanksgiving provided a formal, institu-
tionalized context for the assertion of stereotypical feminine values and experiences. The emphases on nurture, on communion and community, on family, on togetherness, connectedness, were congruent with genteel female values. In nineteenth-century America, as now, women were responsible for making Thanksgiving happen. Males played cameo roles as carvers of the ceremonial turkey, but women prepared the meal, women served the meal, women cleaned up after the meal. And women pressed to make Thanksgiving a national holiday. Although it was Abraham Lincoln who issued the first national Thanksgiving Proclamation in 1863 and William Seward who wrote the text, most students of the holiday credit Sarah Josepha Hale, novelist and editor of Godey’s, with leading the campaign to nationalize the holiday. For over thirty years, she agitated for this moral cause. And it was Lydia Maria Child who wrote “Over the river and through the woods, to grandfather’s house we go.” Thanksgiving became a feminized event, a celebration of connectedness and intimacy within a setting of abundance and nurture.

As a holiday, Thanksgiving gave a religious benediction to, and transformed, the mid-century glorification of dining. Seen from this perspective, the similarities and differences between sideboards and the holiday are illuminating. Both were products of a value system that pervaded the West in the nineteenth century. While grounded in the biblical conception expressed in Genesis, sideboards were props for a worldly lifestyle that celebrated sensory life and elevated it to a high level. Sideboards were products of elite culture and were grounded in courtly, largely secular values. They were parts of settings for formal dining among social peers. And they were emphatically masculine as the age understood that construction, celebrating abundance through violence and domination. Thanksgiving, in contrast, was explicitly religious, albeit Protestant, and was built on middle-class values. It provided an occasion for ceremonial but not necessarily formal dining in which multigenerational bonding became paramount. Mid-century sideboards and Thanksgiving were alternatives and phases of a larger cultural expression. Thanksgiving was an American, middle-class accommodation and assimilation of a courtly, elite-culture concept. As such, it provides a fascinating instance of the mutability of culture.
The elements of nationalism in Thanksgiving identify an emerging conflict between cosmopolitanism and localism, between a world vision and a national vision. Born as a national holiday during the Civil War, Thanksgiving can be seen as an early artifact of the Colonial Revival, transforming and naturalizing cultural expressions generated elsewhere that, for a time, had been part of cosmopolitan culture (2.38).38

Material culture reveals the link between the iconography of dining and Thanksgiving. An illustration of Thanksgiving Day dinner in Harper’s Weekly of 1858 shows that domestic ritual taking place in a dining room adorned with characteristic mid-
The imagery and the holiday collide. In this 1858 illustration of a Thanksgiving dinner, a dining room furnished in the cosmopolitan mid-century style serves as the setting for the nationalized celebration. The emblems of the holiday—turkey, celery, wine—grace the table, while the iconography of dining—pictures of dead game and a stag—adorns the walls.

A more revealing image is the dining room of Louis C. Tiffany as it looked in the 1880s (2.40). The radical winds of the Aesthetic Movement have swept through the space, leaving it spare, planar, and very tasteful. Nothing that was defined as fashionable in the 1850s can be seen. Instead, above the mantel hangs a rather startling Americanized version of the dining room picture. No stag hunts, hanging rabbits, or dead fish here. In their place, a large tom turkey and ripe pumpkin loom up between sere stalks of corn. Here in Tiffany’s dining room are all the pictorial conventions of modern Thanksgiving. Today, when Americans celebrate Thanksgiving, they rarely recognize it as an invented tradition. They assume, as they were meant to, that they are part of a practice that reaches back without interruption or alteration to the days of the Pilgrims. Few realize that they are acting out a scenario that reveals far more about Victorian America than it does about the people of Plymouth in the seventeenth century (2.41).
The aesthetic of the self-consciously arful in the 1880s, bringing with it a new blend of cosmopolitanism and pretentious unpretentiousness. Unassuming furniture, either old or in old styles; old woodwork updated; and a strong Asian feel to the walls and ceramics are all part of a taste generated in England and disseminated through what today might be identified as the art culture avant-garde. What is not English or Asian about this installation is the prominent iconography of American Thanksgiving over the mantle. As it turns out, this decoration never became popular in painted form, but pumpkins, corn stalks, and turkey have been ritually reinvoked ever since as essential elements of the holiday celebration.
The iconography of dining explored in this chapter was dominant until the late 1860s, when it was challenged by an alternative vision. This new vision was part of a major shift in cultural hegemony in the West. It came not from France but from Britain. Its historical references were not Renaissance or Baroque but Gothic or more generally medieval. Sideboards in this new style were still massive, still richly adorned, but their affective and cognitive impacts were dramatically different.\textsuperscript{41} A sideboard made in Grand Rapids in the late 1870s well represents the new genre (2.42). No carving, only incised decoration. Nothing mimetic, everything stylized. Nothing aggressive, nothing distasteful. In 1878, the year this sideboard was probably made, Harriett Spofford wrote: “The perpetual reminder of dead flesh and murderous propensities is not agreeable at table.”\textsuperscript{42} A year earlier, Rhoda and Agnes Garrett attacked
pretentious and vulgar productions . . . which are usually covered with a profusion of ornament in hideous caricatures of every animal and vegetable form. Monsters besmeared with stain and varnish grin at you from every point, and you cannot even open a drawer or a cupboard without having your feelings outraged by coming into contact with the legs or wings of a dead bird or some other ghastly trophy of man’s love of slaughter. 43

Modern spectators may applaud, relieved that not everyone in the nineteenth century was deluded; at least a few had the wit to recognize how offensive these sideboards really were. To take this view is to miss the point entirely, I think. In 1851, these sideboards were accepted enthusiastically. In 1877, they were rejected in disgust. The goods had not changed, the culture had.

How to evaluate this change? Like so many other cultural changes, it seems equivocal. The critics quoted above were women. We can suspect that even more of the home had become feminized by the late 1870s than had been in the 1850s. The dining room had become female territory, a place where violence was rare and relationships appeared safe. Explicit references to constructed masculinity had disappeared, replaced by an environment reflecting the values of constructed femininity. How we feel about that depends on our politics. To my mind, celebrations of the decline of the mid-century idiom are a bit misguided. The act of introducing an alternative mode was not a gesture of cultural boldness but yet another example of genteel avoidance. These objects were indeed distasteful in dining rooms of the 1870s, not because they were, in any objective way, ugly or vulgar but because their imagery was too truthful, too provocative, and ultimately too disruptive. The issues these objects raised, the questions they asked, if pushed far enough, threatened to force the rethinking of major tenets of Western culture. Easier to avoid than rethink. 44

A shift in the paradigm for the home supported this retreat from confronting major questions. By the 1870s, a more bourgeois vision of the home had become wide-
2.42 At the least, the furniture of avoidance. For reformers in the 1870s, dining and dining room furniture were important. What the reformers rejected was the prevailing style, imagery, and iconography of that furniture. Sideboards continued to be prominent, but they were stripped of mimetic decoration. References to the natural world were eliminated. Function became ornament. Indeed, this furniture goes beyond avoidance. This is the furniture of Prohibition. This is the furniture of the Comstock Act. This is the furniture of repression.

Walnut sideboard in the English Reform style
Sales catalog of Nelson, Matter & Co.
Grand Rapids, Michigan, c. 1878
Grand Rapids Public Library
spread. The utopian retreat Kirk Jeffrey identified years ago was not an appropriate place to be forced to confront major questions about the relationship of mankind to the natural world. If anything, it was a place where one could escape from the cares and difficulties, problems and conflicts of the outer world. When these sideboards became popular, the courtly model of domestic life was still prominent. In this model, public and private aspects of life were freely intermingled. In the succeeding model, these two were more effectively segregated. The mid-century iconography of dining had become offensive precisely because it violated the emerging belief that homeliness meant and required seclusion from troubling aspects of the outside world.45

The Aesthetic Movement has often been hailed for rescuing the Victorian world from pretentiousness and vulgarity. Surely it changed the appearance of that world, but who is to say that anyone is better for it. In general, I am suspicious of aesthetic and moral crusades. They generally do more harm than good, avoiding, denying, or suppressing difficult social and cultural issues instead of bringing an open mind to problems and encouraging workable solutions. There are parallels between what amounts to the suppression of these sideboards and the Prohibition movement of the nineteenth century.46 Both were attempts to control behavior and culture. An even closer parallel may be the Comstock Act of 1870, which regulated and effectively suppressed public discussion of sexual matters in America for more than a generation. Sexual problems were not resolved, merely avoided. Advances in personal and public health, birth control, understanding the nature of sexuality, and many other matters were severely inhibited by the Comstock Act. Because sexual information was suppressed, ignorance was promoted.47

In like manner, the cultural if not legal suppression of these sideboards had a deleterious effect. These objects raised serious questions about the relationship of humankind to the natural world and about hierarchy and domination. These questions were connected to others about exploitation of land and human labor. Pushed far enough, these objects might also have led to inquiries into unequal distribution
of resources and the very structure of society. With the new style, these questions evaporated. These same questions may have been asked in the outer world, but they could be safely avoided at home.

In fact, few if any of the issues raised by mid-century sideboards were resolved in the nineteenth century or have been resolved in our own time. Cultural segregation makes it easy to spend more of life avoiding thinking about them or working toward solutions. Many twentieth-century people who react so negatively to these sideboards probably eat meat and believe in the American version of capitalism, yet see no irony in these stances.

What, then, do we finally make of these objects, these dramatic and affecting presences of Victorian dining rooms? They are products of an undeniably romantic and self-conscious age, but today, in our own time of segregation and avoidance, it is their realism that stands out. The people who designed these sideboards acknowledged the earthly origins of the foods they ate and the relationship of humankind to the rest of the animal kingdom. They knew that life depended on death. In short, they understood, or tried to understand, where they fit into the big picture. And they were moved by the immensity and sublimity of what they saw. Considering the state of our own world, it is difficult to fault them for that.