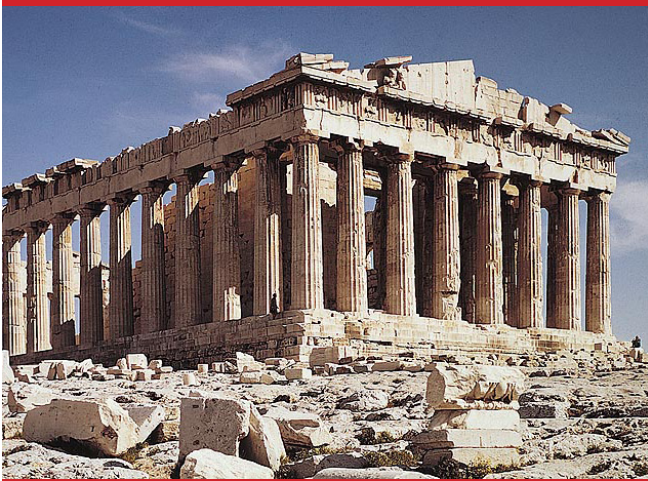


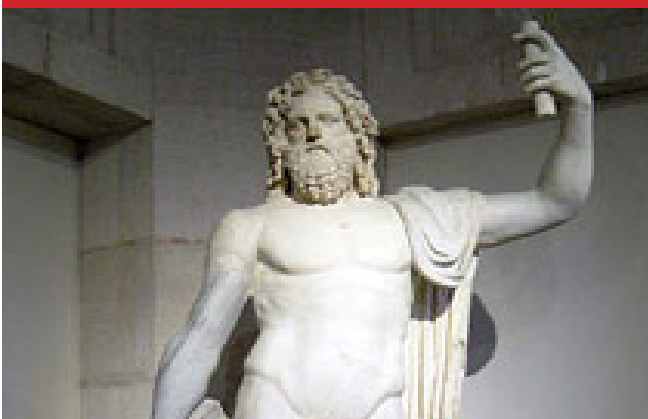


# *Religion in Interior Design*



INDS 3309

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<sup>1</sup>Figure 1

St. Peter's Cathedral from the Italian Baroque period is a classic example of how religion inspired design in history.

## Introduction

The interior space of a home or building forms the setting for many human experiences. The design of an interior relies heavily on how the space is intended to be used; some prefer to design specifically around functionality and only have what is needed in the space, and others prefer to lavishly decorate with beautiful furniture and adornments. Individual needs play a large part in the design of an interior, such as a handicap, the number of people in a family, or the need for a specific piece of furniture such as a large table or a bed. However, another factor that influences the design of interior spaces that is often overlooked is religion. Individuals have an historical tendency to shape their interior spaces according to religious or spiritual beliefs, which is still seen in some cultures today. This may include, but is not necessarily limited to, the interior design of churches or temples and the subsequent mimicking of such designs in private residences, the incorporation of religious figures and iconography in art, paintings, and frescoes, and the design of interior spaces around religious items such as shrines or even statues. These examples of religion in interior design branch back to ancient Egyptian times and carry on through Classic designs, the Renaissance, and through many Asian cultures. This paper will consider several examples of how interior designs in the past were affected by religious and spiritual beliefs and how the design of interior spaces in today's world is still influenced by religion.

## The Classical Period

The Classical style plays a large part in forming the foundation for many other periods of design. Greek style in particular was notable for influencing other cultures, primarily Roman, and Egyptian was unique because it had little outside influence due to its geographical seclusion, which means that Egyptian design choices were unlike almost any other style. A key difference between these two Classical cultures is that the main focus of the Egyptians was on the afterlife, while the Greek focus was on current life. However, there is a similarity between these cultures because they are both polytheistic.

## Egypt

“The Egyptian temple...represents the attempts of the Egyptians to come to terms with divine power in the cosmos” (Snape, 8). Egypt was well known for their polytheistic religion consisting of animals and human-animal hybrids, as well as their divine respect for the afterlife. The belief in the worship of gods even extended to the pharaohs, or rulers of Egypt, because the people believed them to be gods as well, and they were venerated with high respect as the gods were. Egyptian paintings and murals did not feature people painted to scale, but rather painted more important figures, like gods and pharaohs, larger than less important people. Pharaohs



<sup>2</sup>Figure 2

would sit on higher chairs than common folk and would always have their feet up on stools as a demonstration of power. Similarly, the well-respected animal figures in Egyptian culture, even as they were represented on furniture, were given blocks to place their feet on, as seen in Figure 2.

The religious focus of Egyptian culture on the afterlife is epitomized in the Pyramids of Giza, which serve as massive tombs for the venerated pharaohs. Pharaohs would be buried with many



<sup>3</sup>Figure 3

possessions, as seen in King Tut’s tomb in Figure 3, because the Egyptians believed they would need them in the afterlife. Pyramids and temples were often decorated with religious images and statues, mainly of the gods, decorated in lavish materials, representing their power.

Everyday homes of the Egyptians also had religious significance. Because of the belief that gods and pharaohs were of higher class, the average Egyptian home did not contain much furniture, and when it did, the furniture was very low and simple. Never did the average Egyptian citizen sit on a stool higher than the pharaoh's, and never did they use footstools because this was not appropriate for lower



<sup>4</sup>Figure 4

classes. Beds were always kept simple, and were usually on the ground, also for the purpose of maintaining the religious class system. Simple beds contrast strongly to the incredibly decorated and high bed of the pharaoh King Tut, seen in Figure 4. Overall, individual homes and residences were given much less thought and material than the temples and burial places of the venerated pharaohs, resulting in a very simple life for the average Egyptian citizen. “For kings...there was no question that the royal pyramid complex should receive the greatest effort in terms of building work” (Snape, 17).

### **Greece**

“When we speak of Greek architecture we refer, as a rule, to their public buildings...those of religious character occupy the most prominent place” (Dinsmoor, 38). Greek culture and design was very strongly rooted in their polytheistic pagan religion, emphasized by the concept of *Arête*, which taught that beauty was found in simplicity and not overusing materials or lavish decoration. Greeks were very fond of simple shapes and of displaying building materials in their natural form as opposed to covering them in gold or veneers like the Egyptians. This ideal represents the strongest difference between Greek and Egyptian culture. Greek temples were the most important buildings in their cities; like the Egyptians, the modest residential dwelling paled in comparison to the much larger temples, as



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can be seen in the example of the Parthenon in Figure 5. “The buildings dedicated to their divinities were decorated and furnished” (Dinsmoor, 39).



<sup>5</sup>Figure 5

Along with the pagan worship of many gods which led to astounding architecture on the part of the Greeks, their foundational love of nature led to many design decisions as well. One author goes so far as to argue that Greek culture was “founded on the worship of nature” (Abercrombie & Whiton 49), suggesting that the love of nature in itself was almost a religious concept. Nature ‘worship’ was seen in Greco-Roman cultures in many ways,



<sup>6</sup>Figure 6

including the animal symbolism in furniture, the imitation of floral designs in Corinthian columns, repeating natural patterns like acanthus leaves or the egg-and-dart, and even the placement of temples: “it seems that most temples were laid out to face the sunrise” (Dinsmoor, 49). In Figure 6, note the natural floral beauty represented in a Corinthian column. Other column styles

developed by the Greeks were also symbolic of nature but also religiously reflected their gods, who were often depicted in human form. Ionic columns were designed around the natural curvaceous beauty of a female, and Doric columns were designed around the sturdiness of male figures. Caryatids were also used, which were female figures, usually goddesses, depicted in place of columns which demonstrated their physical support of the structure.

## The English Medieval and Gothic Style

While the Greco-Roman style favoured polytheism, naturalism, and understood the beauty of the human form, the Medieval Period in England was very conservative due to the rise of Christianity. Religious influence was very strong in this period in art and design; the Virgin Mary was a popular icon in

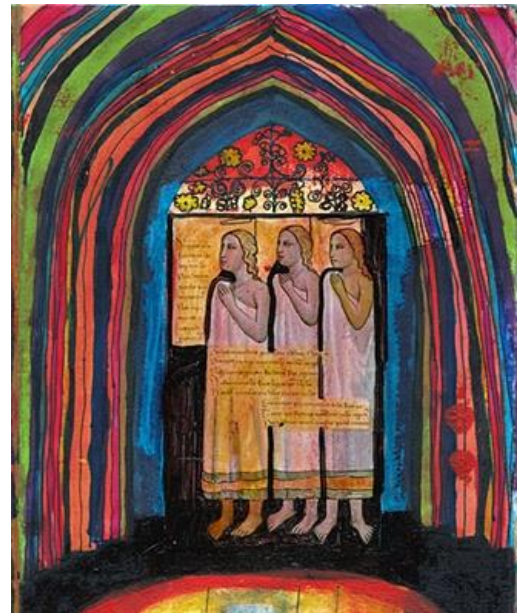


<sup>7</sup>Figure 7

art and frescoes, and increasing conservatism was seen in all design. Christians firmly believed in modesty and the importance of God above all else, which eliminated nude statues, liberal ideas, and over-decorated spaces and furniture.

“Religious expression was at the heart of Gothic design” (Abercrombie & Whiton, 140). There is a very clear distinction between the Three Graces paintings in the Roman times (Figure 7) and in the Medieval Period (Figure 8).

The strong religious influence in design during this period is also apparent due to development of many new cathedrals. Always the largest, grandest, and most expensive buildings in an area, “every medieval church was an evocation of the heavenly Jerusalem...” (Wilson, 8), and “great rivalry developed between towns and villages to outdo each other in the beauty, size, and grandeur of their cathedrals,” (Abercrombie & Whiton, 144). These cathedrals were not only a physical representation of the power and influence of the Church at this time, but also the beginning of new residential



<sup>8</sup>Figure 8

designs which would soon appear mimicking the cathedral designs. For example, “there was an increase in the sophistication of secular and domestic buildings as well [as cathedrals]” (Abercrombie & Whiton,

141), and the three main qualities of Gothic design (the pointed arch, the ribbed vault ceiling, and the flying buttresses) were also beginning to appear in residential design as well as cathedral design (Abercrombie & Whiton). Citizens in England during this time period were so caught up in the influence of the Church that they were anxious to bring its influence into their own homes as well. This was apparent with the appearance of conservative images like the modest version of the Three Graces above, as well as depictions of the Virgin Mary, and fireplace designs which resembled cathedrals. An example of such a fireplace is seen in Figure 9; the fireplace has columns, repeating patterns, and even statues mimicking Gothic cathedral design.

Other influences that were passed from cathedrals to residences were smaller; “the circle and the sphere, by virtue of having no beginning and no end, were associated with eternity and by extension with immortality and heaven; hence arches and vaults



<sup>9</sup>Figure 9

which are part-circular” (Wilson, 8). These arches, among other smaller designs such as the small repeating pattern in Figure 9, are reflective of how religious Gothic architecture and Christian influence spread throughout Europe during the period.

### Asian Design

“Asian-influenced interior design draws its inspiration primarily from nature, culture, and religion.” (Lee) Many Chinese and Japanese design choices are derived from Buddhist beliefs, specifically Zen Buddhism, which focuses on peace, tranquility, and using only what you need. Chinese design in



particular is also influenced by the concept of Feng Shui, which “can affect the orientation of buildings, building elements, and furniture” (Abercrombie & Whiton, 211). Despite not being a religious belief, Feng Shui is still a spiritual concept rooted in Chinese superstition and beliefs, which in turn shapes interior design.

### *Chinese*

One example of how Chinese design is enhanced by spiritual beliefs is Chinoiserie (see Figure 10), a style of painting or finishing which “displays bold hues of colour...and showcases Chinese-inspired embellishments” (Lee). It is a reflection of spirituality because “fiery red and orange are favourite colours as they symbolize luck and prosperity” (Lee).

Chinoiserie became popular in Europe during the Baroque period and has spread to other parts of the world, though admittedly, not as perfect as it had been in its original Chinese form. It remains an example of spirituality in interior design mainly because of its colours; colours are very important to Chinese design as they often symbolize



<sup>10</sup>Figure 10

different things, for example the colour red is believed to be lucky.

Chinese designs also reflect spiritual beliefs through the concept of Feng Shui, or “wind-water” which teaches that “the position of the home and furniture arrangement contribute to overall well-being” (Lee), and that “you will experience greater expansion and harmony in both the mental and spiritual aspects of your life” (Barreras). Feng Shui influences interior design by making suggestions allowing for the flow of Ch’i or “life force energy”, such as being “sure that your entrance is clear. Keep it uncluttered and welcoming. Try adding brightly coloured flowers...placing a water fountain at the entrance is a powerful way to invite a greater flow of health...into the building” (Barreras).



<sup>11</sup>Figure 11

Other Chinese spiritual beliefs affect not only the specific placement of objects within a home but also architectural decisions such as the design of roofs and the placement of stairs in the home. For example, it is a Chinese superstition that roofs should be sloped so that evil spirits, which could only travel in straight lines, could not enter into homes because they would simply float off

the roofs. Once again, these traditional concepts in Chinese culture are not specifically religious, but spiritual in nature. It is noteworthy, however, because despite being ancient, these concepts are still used in Chinese design today, as seen in a modern home in Figure 11.

### *Japanese*

Like Greek culture, Japanese culture was focused on appreciation of nature and subsequent integration of nature into interior design. “Nature is introduced into the home by incorporating indoor water fountains, tatami mats made from straw and exotic floral arrangements” (Lee). Also akin to the Greeks, Japanese believed in “simplicity and minimalist design” (Lee), and as such they did not over clutter or over decorate their homes and tended to keep furniture to a minimum. While Buddhism ideals influenced Japanese design as in China, a religion that actually began in Japan was Shintoism, and “A distinctive Shinto architecture of simple, unpainted wooden shrines did develop, usually placed in quiet, serene settings” (Abercrombie & Whiton , 234). Religious influence plays a large part in the average life of a Japanese citizen, including



<sup>12</sup>Figure 12

visiting shrines or Buddhist temples, and even worshipping or making offerings to *kami* gods in household shrines. Many interiors are formulated around these indoor shrines, which can be quite large,



<sup>13</sup>Figure 13

as seen in Figure 12. Exteriors of homes also often contain religious evidence, including Zen Buddhist gardens, as shown in Figure 13.

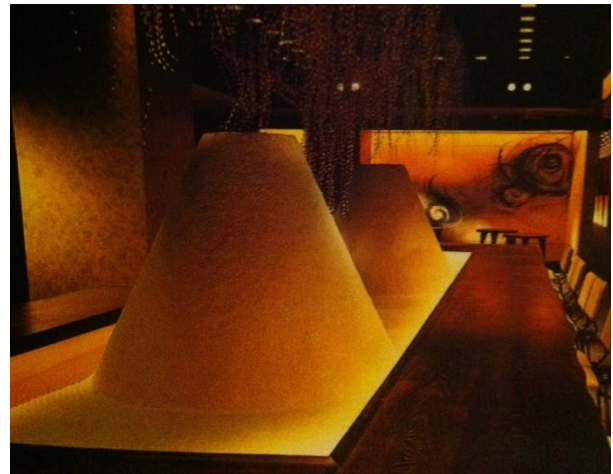
A very unique concept in Japanese interiors stems from an ancient religious concept called *tokonoma*, which “is a raised alcove in which Japanese art such as a hanging scroll (*Kakemono*) or a flower arrangement is

displayed. A custom of having this built-in recessed space in a Japanese room goes back more than 500 years, and while the *tokonoma* has lost much of its early religious nature, it's still very much an honored part of the Japanese room” (Presentation Zen). This concept of the *tokonoma* was adopted by American designer Frank Lloyd Wright and is still used today in many homes, both traditional and contemporary.

### Religious Interiors Today

Japanese architecture in particular today still maintains many religious influences of traditional designs. One example is the *tatesuna*, which can be seen in Figures 14 and 15, respectively, in front of a traditional Shinto shrine and inside a contemporary Japanese restaurant in Tokyo. “*tatesuna* are symbolic of the spirits inhabiting the mountains and have long had a place at the entrance to Shinto shrines” (Jitsukawa, 148). The concept of *tokonoma* is still used today in modern architecture as well, although significantly less popular in today’s world than the earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century.



<sup>14</sup>Figure 14<sup>15</sup>Figure 15

It is not only Japanese but also American designers that made contributions to religion in design, though in less obvious ways. Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe stated that “God in the details,” (Clark) and he also believed that in design, less is more. His ideas, which translated into his famous Farnsworth House, relates to the Greek concept of *arête* as well as the influence of ‘God’ in design.

Modern North American Shakers and other Amish communities still adhere to many policies and traditions from many years ago which often include religious traditions; “early American religious beliefs did not encourage fancy or frivolity” (Abercrombie & Whiton, 430). The Shaker community in particular based many design choices around their religious and spiritual beliefs; their churches were painted different colours than the rest of their buildings and their spiritual beliefs in never taking more than you need and everyone in the community being equal still exist in many such communities today.

“Modern conceptions of religious architecture are based around the idea of special buildings or designated spaces” (Snape, 8). While this idea of having a specific room for a specific purpose dates back to the Egyptian times and was made popular by the Victorian period, today we still believe in this concept. We no longer have embalming rooms as the Egyptians did for wrapping mummies, but we do have kitchens, living rooms, bathrooms, bedrooms, and (though rare in North America) even rooms specifically designed for prayer, religious worship, or the study of religious texts. This is a demonstration of how religious influence from Classical times has transgressed into modern times.

## Conclusion

Religion always seemed to play a large part in historical interior designs. Both Egyptian and Greek cultures put more focus and design effort into their temples than their own homes, and Asian concepts such as *tokonoma* and *Feng Shui* are still used today.

Nowadays, however, for the most part, religion in interior design is more minimal and hidden in interior design than almost any other point in history. But, it is still there. From our large, ultra-modern churches and cathedrals which are still being built today to the small crucifixes adorning living room walls, religion still exists and shapes interior design, however differently each part of the world may be affected by it.

***Paper Word Count: 2,747***

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