



The Exotic Interior:

*About Colonial Legacies and Cultural
Appropriation in Interior Design*

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Abstract

This article examines how the exotic interior continues to structure contemporary Western retail design, using Anthropologie and West Elm as case studies. Their reliance on global motifs is situated within longer histories of colonial collecting and visual classification, where cultural material was reordered to fit Western aesthetic systems. Postcolonial theory provides the analytical frame: Edward Said's writing on constructed difference identifies how imagery shapes cultural authority, while Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry explains the shift that occurs when cultural symbols enter Western commercial contexts. Nicholas Mirzoeff's discussion of white sight clarifies the viewing position embedded in these interiors, and Tunstall's decolonial framework offers methods for re-orienting design practice.

Catalogue imagery, product styling, and descriptive copy reveal how motifs become

detached from their cultural settings and reintroduced as repeatable decorative units. These strategies maintain visual coherence for the consumer but reduce cultural specificity. The analysis argues that this pattern reflects broader extractive tendencies within retail design, where global references circulate without attention to their material conditions or origins.

The article concludes by outlining decolonial approaches grounded in collaboration, context, and material transparency. These methods do not remove the commercial pressures shaping contemporary interiors, but they shift the processes through which cultural material enters design. They offer possibilities for practices that engage cultural references without diminishing them.

Key words: *exoticism, post-colonial, cultural appropriation, interiors, design*

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Introduction

The concept of Exotic Interior endures as an unwavering theme of Western retail design (here used to denote Europe and North America, while acknowledging the term's limitations as a homogenising construct). It often places patterned textiles and fabrics, and saturated, bright colours in neutral based rooms. This aesthetic, I argue, is born out of the colonial consumption and display of material objects and is thus implicated in a long history of unethical practice. Close analysis is given to West Elm, and Anthropologie, both global home décor and furniture brands that rely on borrowed motifs as an integral part of their identity and campaign. These motifs can be traced back to the aesthetic practice of the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, and Latin America. When uprooted from their cultural backdrop and thus their place-based significance, I find that a process of identity fragmentation occurs. A challenge perpetuated by the mute, staged environment offered by West Elm and Anthropologie, whom provide little credit for the design's origins.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) provides the foundation for this analysis. Said argued that the West produced 'the Orient' as an imagined

construct, a collection of 'exotic' ideas and imagery through which cultural difference was fabricated and sustained. While Said's framework was developed primarily in relation to French and British representations of the Middle East and North Africa, this paper extends its application to include South Asia and Latin America within a broader pattern of othering and cultural representation. Drawing on his ideas, I examine how such constructs manifested materially in the arts, interior decoration, and the retail of these objects. Homi Bhabha's (1994) concepts of mimicry and hybridity extend Said's analysis, revealing how cultural motifs are destabilised once displaced, producing meanings that are ambivalent; neither authentic nor neutral. Nicholas Mirzoeff's (2023) concept of white sight illuminates how visual branding and retail environments continue to center the white Western gaze as the normative viewing position. Finally, the work of design anthropologist Dori Tunstall (2023) grounds these theoretical frameworks in practice, her decolonial design methodology offering tools for reorienting design towards a more ethical future.

Colonial Interiors and the Construction of Exotic Space



Fig. 1 Carved wood fireplace



Fig. 2 Hand carved corbel

Eighteenth and nineteenth-century European interiors relied heavily on imported materials which were considered a luxury commodity. Rooms were adorned with Chinese wallpaper, chinoiserie, Japanese lacquer, and West African mahogany carved objects (McClintock, 1995, p. 207). These items signified the wealth and stature of the homeowner, connoting a level of cultural capital reserved exclusively for members of high society. Said's concept of Orientalism probes attention to the ideology sustaining this practice. Where the adoption of these material aesthetics reflected a possession of the 'Orient', molding it into a figure that served its own desires and ambitions (1978, p.3).



Fig. 3 Plasterwork stands out against blue and yellow color scheme

Chinese drawing room, Claydon House

Seen in Figure 1 is the Chinese Drawing Room in Claydon House, Buckinghamshire, which was designed in the 1760s. The carved ornamented wood, arches and Chinoiserie are combined with British spatial qualities of high ceilings and grand doors, rather presenting a fabricated idea, not a cultural environment for these element's origins to be appreciated. Bhabha described this as "almost the same, but not quite" (1994, p. 88). The design maintains its distance, creating familiarity while keeping the referenced culture at an arm's length.



Fig. 4 Tours at the Royal Pavillion



Fig. 5 Carved pagodas as decoration



Fig. 6 Music Room, Royal Pavillion, Brighton

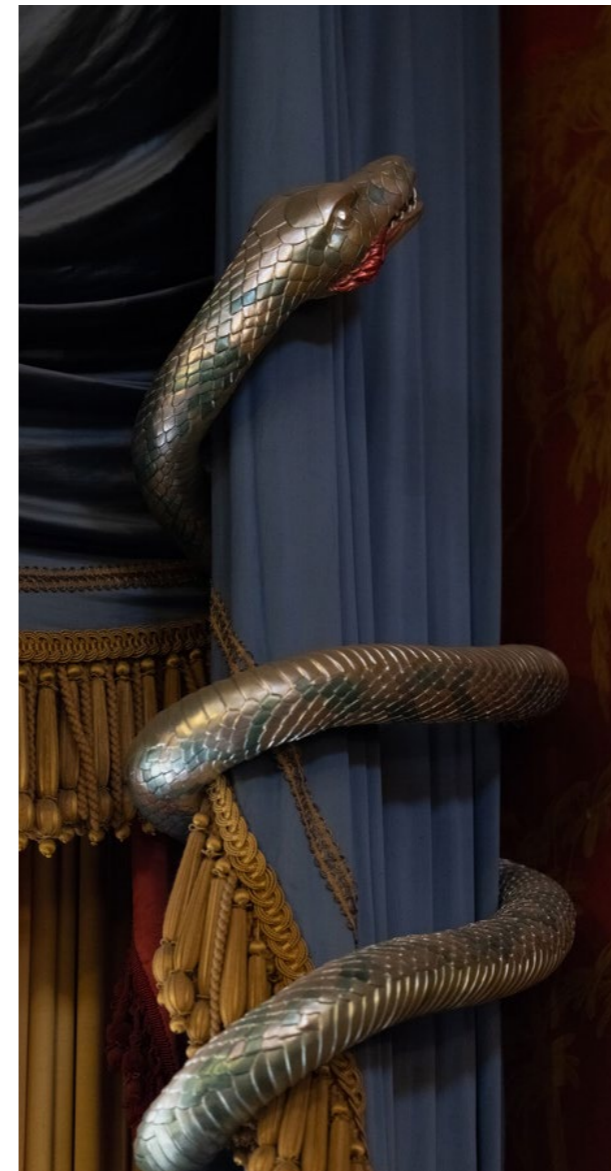


Fig. 7 Silver dragon sculpture as curtain holdback



Royal Pavillion, Brighton

Exaggerating these ideas further, the Brighton Pavillion (fig.4,5,6) was redesigned for George IV in the early nineteenth century, with interiors that combine Chinese and Indian design motifs and serve as theatrical spectacle. Mirzoeff argued that the imperial outlook was dependent on the rearranging of existing cultures to serve a controlled viewing position, where cultural material was positioned using the coloniser's own structure of control (2023, p. 59). These historical examples pose a significance as they show how cultural symbols made their way into Western design through multi-faceted systems such as trade, classification, and most importantly, imperial power. Contemporary retail interiors continue to reuse this approach, concealed under an often softer, commercialised appearance.



Theoretical framework and post- colonial approaches to design

This article combines four theoretical sources to help understand how retail interiors continue to produce mediated ideas of cultural difference that serve a Western ideology.

Said and Constructed Difference

Said stated that “knowledge of the Orient... creates the Orient” (1978, p. 40). He described Orientalism as a system that shapes European’s method of producing knowledge about the Orient, and how this system encouraged it as a subject of study. Intent on transforming lived cultures and experiences into skewed images and patterns capable of arrangement and interpretation, ultimately changing a culture not belonging to them. This critique remains relevant in contemporary interiors. Cultural elements are packaged into categories such as “Moroccan”, “artisan”, or “heritage”. These labels simplify and often mislabel tradition with a disregard for the culture it derives from, despite improving marketability and salability for a wider audience. This approach appears in West Elm and Anthropologie’s catalogues and home décor pieces, which amount to a constructed cultural meaning as opposed to the grounded, lived histories.

Bhabha and ambivalence

Mimicry as a concept applied refers to a reproduction of culture that at once feels familiar, however carries tensions. It explains the unstable image of global motifs and décor within Western interiors and the way the industry follows the pattern of repeating the difference in a controlled way. It picks and chooses. For example, a decorative cushion using a recognizable North African pattern, mass produced in a warehouse facility, generating a hybrid image that is controlled by the brands yet detached from its regional craft traditions and heritage craft (Bhabha, 1994, p. 122).

Bhabha’s concept of ambivalence is applicable

here, where the retailers and brands are permitted use of cultural motifs, while avoiding explicit reference or attribution to their origins. The ambiguity of the situation becomes a marketing tactic, transforming these designs to appear palatable to the mass consumer.

Mirzoeff and White Sight

Mirzoeff identifies the prevalence of whiteness, assumed to be the central viewing position of visual culture (2023, p. 13). His concept of white sight makes evidence the making of cultural difference as something to observe, arrange, and refine, with retail interior marketing perpetuating this logic. To create a stable viewing experience, they use neutral walls, bright lights, and simplified styles to frame such items in way ‘digestible’ for consumers. With this stability, cultural items become accents, appearing in the form of patterns, colours, or textures in an organized environment informed by Western taste.

Tunstall and Decolonial Design

Recognizing communities and cultures that have created and evolved these motifs and materials is essential for decentering harmful Western ideas about oriental culture, a decolonial lens central to the work of Tunstall (2023). The idea of decolonial design aims to reverse these deconstructed patterns of extraction by encouraging a return to the origins of cultures and using methods that foreground lived experiences (Tunstall, 2023, p. 23). This helps redirect retail imagery away from a sole focus on visual appeal and trends. Tunstall advocates for “the story of the people, not the product” (2023, p. 45), a position that interior curators rarely adopt as the continuous narrative remains surface level.

Case study: West Elm and Anthro- pologie



Fig. 8 West Elm Safi Hand-Tufted Wool Rug

Circulating within Western retail design, West Elm and Anthropologie sit as top contributors and are an example of how global motifs circulate within the industry. Their showrooms and marketing use bright lighting, steady styling, and limited colour palettes that encourage cultural motifs to conform to homogenous, versatile design elements.

Both brands cater to middle-class consumers who expect their interiors to portray and communicate taste. Specific cultural motifs help build this identity, with their own identity subjected to flattening during this process. The objects offer the illusion of cultural capital; of a well-travelled and 'tasteful' individual.



Fig. 9 West Elm Camelia Reversible Rug

West Elm: Moroccan Collection and Related Themes

West Elm's Moroccan line reuses North African geometric patterns into rugs, cushions, and decorative décor.

Camelia Rug, West Elm

In fig.8 and fig.9, colour palettes shift from saturated reds to softer monotones. Imagery uses natural light and pale uncluttered backgrounds, with little to no context, choices that suggest refinement and mutability. They distance the motifs from their usual cultural and architectural settings, presenting pattern with no context. Tunstall's (2023, p. 35) argument about the separation of histories from objects is illustrated here and applicable widely, where an

items origin is made invisible.

West Elm uses descriptions like 'heritage', 'vintage inspired' and 'craft traditions.' These terms portray broad associations also found in earlier museum displays. Paul Greenhalgh identified nineteenth-century descriptions that grouped cultural items under broad and vague labels (2000, p. 82), a vague labelling that reappears in retail interiors and in companies such as West Elm.



Fig. 10 Anthropologie Ablia wall hanging

Anthropologie and Global Bohemian Aesthetic

Anthropologie's 'Global Boho' collection use carved ornamental wood, patterned fabrics, and wall fixture lighting pieces.

Imagery highly relies on strategically placed cushions, a clean background, and decorative items. The muted background colours as seen in fig.10 enhance the visibility of the product and lighting remains consistent and even. These features are reused across many of their products and can be observed across the website and catalogues. Such choices frame the viewers perception, as they place global motifs in a controlled domestic space.

Text that follows these product listings often use



Fig. 11 Anthropologie Ablia wall hanging

descriptors such as 'heritage inspired', or 'hand finished'. Kawamura and De Jong noted that such language can generalise cultural identity, when a description suggests authenticity and fails to define origin (2022, p. 47). Anthropologie's catalogues rarely name specific origins, craft forms, or artisans. Overall, cultural complexity becomes a background note in a polished environment, a visual formula that the Anthropologie interiors follow.



Fig. 12 Anthropologie Ablia wall hanging

Product Language and Branding

Susan Stewart argued that souvenirs produce imagined experiences (1993, p. 135). Retailers often use language as a tool in shaping the exotic interior. Descriptions such as 'heritage', 'wander', and 'faraway' are used to frame décor as markers of cultural distance.

Steven Miles described retail spaces and experiences as "controlled fantasies", a term applicable here (2010, p. 56). The concept of exotic interior offers the illusion of cultural engagement, despite its lack of. It positions the objects as accessible, with a narrative that supports this tone but lacks depth. This aligns with the behavioral patterns apparent in Orientalist interiors, as in both instances cultural symbols appear without meaningful context.

Visual Composition

Visual composition in Anthropologie's catalogues and website is an indicator of these ideas, they reinforce the same narrative through reducing visual noise, which supports the viewers orientation. Previously, Orientalist design combined multiple motifs from different cultures without an awareness of the often non-sensical pairings. Contemporary interior styling does the same, but within a more refined and selective presentation. The only difference is tone and structure.

The Exotic Interior as a Consumer Framework

The Exotic interior transform cultural elements into decorative material objects to suit Western expectations. As commercial, Western brands, West Elm and Anthropologie rely on these adopted material objects, which act as a selling point by appealing to the consumers taste, one rooted in a colonial history. But this comes at a cost to the objects themselves. When culturally specific motifs enter global circulation, they are vulnerable to the influence of new cultural ideals, becoming flexible units that can be arranged without proper credit or contextual

Taste and Cultural Capital

Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) commentary on taste explains how design choices in a home or space becomes a class indicator, suggesting that interior design becomes social positioning (p. 56). Cultural motifs, when transformed into global motifs, are successful when retailers and marketers position them as sophisticated additions. The exotic interior is a signal of awareness of cultural references, travel, and sophistication, while not requiring previous knowledge of their true histories. All this forms a lifestyle identity supported on selective cultural engagement.

Ruben Pater argued that design often frames aesthetic judgment as neutral (2016, p. 12). This view hides the cultural preferences that are embedded in mass taste, and when global motifs enter this setting, they become part of a skewed reality where they appear stable and refined.

Flattened Cultural Contexts

Arjun Appadurai describes how objects change meaning as they move across contexts, which the exotic interior follows (1986, p. 5). A cushion using a North African pattern becomes a decorative piece in a Western living room, while its original roots or association with architecture and daily life fade.

Anthropologie and West Elm often describe their items with brief descriptions that include buzzwords that mention heritage without further explanation. The references they make signal global influence, they do not provide cultural history. This approach is easier and more convenient to fit into wider commercial practices that continue to value recognizable aesthetics over complexity and meaning.

Arnd Schneider described these shifts as 'significant overlays' (2012, p. 348). The object becomes a layer in the mix where cultural meaning is less prioritized than commercial and profitable value. Retail design usually emphasizes the commercial layer, while the cultural layer remains muted.

Algorithmic Circulation and Image Repetition

The exotic interior spread can be majorly contributed to digital platforms. Social media like Instagram and Pinterest algorithms favour bright, uncluttered images, and photos used for retail are designed to fit this visual preference as it helps them circulate to a higher number of viewers. The platforms reward repetition across feeds, in return, it encourages brands to follow such formulas that align with platform preferences.

Khandwala (2019) describes this trend as "Instagram colonialism." This phrase captures the ease and accessibility of with which cultural motifs become part of online mood boards with countless saves. They circulate without deeper context and appear in arrangements that are repeated, all while weakening the original meaning behind them. Anthropologie and West Elm are examples of brands that create imagery precisely to fit that cycle. To be favoured by the algorithm on platforms, their photographs show symmetrical arrangements, and softened shadows, making the exotic interior a reproducible visual unit with a formula for success.

Historic Parallels and Contemporary Use

The exotic interior doesn't exactly replicate colonial rooms, as the historical and political situations have greatly differed. However, parallels present their way in how items appear, how rooms are generally arranged, and how cultural difference is still a manageable visual element.

Classification and Display

In the nineteenth century, museums used to group objects with labels that simplified diverse cultures such as "oriental" or "Indian" or "African" (Greenhalgh, 2000, p. 82), categories created through imperial thinking. Retail interiors showcase similar traits today by using labels and product names including "Moroccan" or "artisan" or "nomadic". Kawamura and De Jong discussed how words like "artisan" often masks the labour behind the crafts, creating a sense of false authenticity and removing the need for meaningful engagements (2022, p. 52). Retailers are dependent on these

words as they create consistency across their product lines and collections, making it easy to group them together. This classification shifts how interiors appear as items from different cultures end up sitting within the same room, and an environment where cultural symbols lose specificity.

Curated Distance

The aim is to present the viewer as the central subject, with polished presentations and clean and balanced items, giving the viewer control over the environment. Retail interiors produces distance between the view and the cultural sources referenced, Mirzoeff's idea of white sight appears here (2023, p. 67). West Elm's global artisan campaign (West Elm, 2018) demonstrates this idea, where the main imagery arranges items from various regions in a calm structured room, where once again their origins fall secondary to their visual agendas.



Decolonial Approaches to Interior design

Decolonializing methods offer design options that shift the general practice towards a more respectful, collaborative setting, where there is cultural accountability, it requires new frameworks that brand must align with for sourcing, narrating, and representing their interiors and products.

Community Based Design, Accreditation, And Ethical Sourcing

Tunstall emphasizes that design must begin with the stories of people and places to which the materials and motifs are connected to and originating from (2023, p. 67). Community based design joins people together to share craftsmanship, authority, and produces important dialogue, to create shared authorship, this approach often highlights and reveals details that are missing in retail imagery, such as the significance patterns, craft traditions and materials. It's a remedy to help treat motifs as parts of lived or living cultures and reduces the risk of extraction and exclusion.

Retail brands continue to exclude artisans out of the narrative, leaving them unaccredited. Implementing ethical sourcing improves brand transparency by naming the people and cultures involved properly, to create a fuller picture of the marketed product and lifestyle. Schultz et al. argued that design should be able to recognize knowledge holders, in this case, the artisans and cultures, as a part of decolonial responsibility that retailers should uphold (2018, p. 89).

Credit does not solve every issue by any means, however, it helps form a strong foundation to start shifting the market to portray the objects within their contextual origins and opens new spaces for active dialogues about context. Steps that steer away from extraction include partaking in practices such as documenting the production process, share stories about cultural significance, and showcase the environment from which their materials originate, and some designers have already taken a step in this direction.

Material Transparency in the Design Process

Transparency generally helps provide a fuller, more accurate picture of how items circulate within the design world, it targets conscious audiences, and makes people aware of real, raw heritage. Documenting processes and manufacturing, whether it be mass or hand crafted, including extraction and environmental impact, is essential for business to help bridge the gap and narrative we are continuing to observe.

Material transparency offers a practical way to apply decolonial methods within interior design. This approach goes beyond crediting artisans. It documents the full chain of production, including extraction, labor, transportation, and environmental impact. Transparency produces a fuller picture of how items circulate. It also challenges the separation between object and origin.

Some designers now publish material maps that show where fibers come from, who dyes them, and how patterns relate to specific cultural practices, giving back credit where it's rightfully due, and maintaining an ethical practice. These maps highlight the links between geographical regions and related aesthetic forms. They help designers and consumers alike notice how certain motifs can so easily become detached once they enter Western markets. This method encourages reflection on why some elements travel easily while others remain tied to context. Luckily, this practice does not slow commercial production dramatically, but most importantly, it changes how cultural references appear in design planning. It supports a shift toward accountability and reduces the distance between representation and reality in contemporary interior design.

Reframing design education

Many programs that teach and inform people about design still highlight western design histories as a central reference point, whereas in this current day and age a wider, more varied approach is essential, as students and learner who are exposed to global histories can analyze motifs more critically and justly. Learning how to design interiors within respect to cultural systems helps future designers navigate cultural references with sensitivity and appreciation. Tunstall argues that curricula lack inclusion of global design histories and cultural frameworks (2023, p. 112).

Collaborative practice

Decolonial design positions shared authorship as a central method. It distributes authority across designers, artisans, and cultural specialists, refusing the single, stable perspective that usually structures retail narratives. Co-authored material appears in some catalogues, curatorial texts, and independent publications, where multiple voices articulate the conditions that shape an object. These layered accounts disrupt the smooth coherence that commercial interiors rely on. They open space for specificity that is often removed in the production of the exotic interior. Mainstream retail environments rarely adopt these approaches. Their visual language depends on concise messaging and unified tone. The introduction of multiple narrative strands introduces friction; it resists the clean sequencing required for lifestyle imagery. Multivocal accounts introduce uneven detail, shifting emphasis from surface design to the processes and histories that inform it. This disrupts the controlled clarity that defines the retail representation of cultural material.



Conclusion

The exotic interior remains a persistent structure within Western retail design. Anthropologie and West Elm continue to position global motifs within carefully composed domestic environments, where cultural references are stabilized through polished surfaces and controlled visual framing. The images echo older systems of classification and display that narrow cultural material into familiar aesthetic categories. In this setting, motifs lose complexity and circulate as decorative elements rather than as expressions tied to specific histories or practices.

Postcolonial theory provides a clear framework for understanding these operations. Said's analysis of constructed difference demonstrates how visual languages organize cultural meaning. Bhabha's concept of mimicry highlights the instability that emerges when cultural material is absorbed into Western commercial systems. Mirzoeff's writing on white sight foregrounds the viewing position embedded in these interiors, where the visual field reinforces normative spectatorship. Tunstall's decolonial methods offer models for rethinking these structures and repositioning design practice toward responsibility and reciprocity.

Retail interiors continue to depend on visual formulas that separate motifs from their cultural contexts. These formulas produce coherent

lifestyle narratives, yet they also reduce cultural material to repeatable patterns. As a result, the connection between motif, origin, and tradition becomes increasingly abstract, absorbed into broader consumer frameworks.

Future approaches can shift these dynamics. Decolonial design emphasizes context, collaboration, and material transparency. It treats cultural motifs as part of living systems shaped by labour, geography, and community. It recognizes artisans as knowledge holders rather than anonymous producers. These frameworks do not erase the commercial conditions that structure retail design, but they introduce methods that disrupt extractive habits and foreground relationships that support cultural integrity.

The exotic interior will continue to circulate because it aligns with established market preferences and visual conventions. Yet its persistence does not foreclose change. Design practitioners can adjust the processes through which cultural material enters commercial space, adopting approaches that support shared narratives and acknowledge the conditions of production. These shifts create possibilities for interiors that register cultural meaning without reducing it, offering a more grounded and accountable engagement with global aesthetics.

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Figure 4: Brighton and Hove Museums (2025) *Hire The Music Room at the Royal Pavilion Brighton & Hove Museums*. 22 October 2025 [online]. Available from: [https://brightonmuseums.org.uk/venue-hire/the-music-room-at-the-royal-](https://brightonmuseums.org.uk/venue-hire/the-music-room-at-the-royal-pavilion/)

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