



Martha Stewart Roundtable

It Was Always a Good Thing: Historical Precedents for Martha Stewart

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I have been a subscriber to *Martha Stewart Living* since the spring of 1995. My interest in Stewart began earlier that year, when my mother bought me my first Martha Stewart cookbook, from which I concocted some incredible appetizers for a Superbowl party. Admittedly, the guests preferred the store-bought cheese-flavored popcorn to my salmon tartare on homemade potato chips, but I had enjoyed the experience of devoting an entire weekend to planning and fulfilling an unusual menu. At the time, Martha Stewart was not yet a household name, her magazine had just begun its run, and many people, amazingly enough, had no idea who she was, or why I would want to make her hors d'oeuvres for a party. Most people had no opinion of Martha Stewart one way or another: she had not yet polarized Americans into thinking she either brought "good things" or repression to modern women.

That was about the time that I was trying to write a dissertation proposal. I was, in fact, trying (unsuccessfully) to link the history of domesticity to modern questions about the formation of national ideologies about class and gender. I was attempting to figure out a way to show that women writing about the home had made important contributions to different aspects of society, not always limited by a notion of "separate spheres" into thinking of the home as different from the rest of society. I was trying to demonstrate that nineteenth-century domesticity might be important to the way we understand women's relationship

with the outside world then, and with home today. Meanwhile, I was teaching a course, about the material culture of the nineteenth-century American home. While discussing an essay by Catharine Beecher in which she recommends (in the 1840s) making pinecone frames for parlor lithographs to bring nature into the home, one of my students whipped that month's issue of *Martha Stewart Living* out of her bag. The magazine had an article that, eerily enough, suggested picking up nature's gifts—such as pinecones—from the front lawn and gluing them into fanciful shapes for picture frames. Perhaps we were not so far removed from Catharine Beecher's world as we thought, suggested my student. Perhaps ideas about the relationship between nature and domesticity were just as powerful now as they had been in the 1840s. Perhaps now, I had a topic for my dissertation.

That work, soon to become a book entitled *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart: A Cultural History of Domestic Advice*, investigates the history of women's writing about the home. These works are grounded in their historical moments, yet they also build on the past and anticipate future issues and concerns. Moving from the 1840s to the 1960s, my larger study emphasizes the 50-year period between 1890 and 1940, since this was a prolific period of writing and thinking about the home on the part of hundreds of American women. The books they wrote entered them into various debates about morality, science, modernity, and design. These authors—newspaper editors, home economists, journalists, scientists, artists—used the home's features to explain larger issues. For example, parlor furniture stood for honesty and frugality, and the elimination of bric-a-brac represented Americanism and modernity. They explored the romance of other cultures, the psychology of wall color and girls' bedrooms, and praised the open space plan. The collected work of all of these people provides a version of American history, using the middle-class home—rather than the Senate chamber or the factory—as the base of study.

Martha Stewart has built on the prolific history of domestic writing and uses the history of domesticity in her work. She and her employees and assistants read past works and learn from experts in certain aspects of historical decorating. Her particular historical moment, coming as it does after thirty years of a movement for women's rights and related changes in the relationship of most middle-class women with their homes, means that her readers may have a more complicated relationship with the home than previous generations. Stewart brings the past into the future by talking about antiques and other symbols of the past even as she launches her web site and her IPO on the New York Stock Exchange. Hers is a peculiar melding of the ultra-modern and the throwback. The bringing of domesticity into the twentieth-first century demands a look back to what came before.

This essay, presented in slightly different form at the October 1999 Annual Meeting of the American Studies Association during a roundtable session, presents several examples of the way that Martha Stewart echoes those who came

before. In most of what she does, Stewart evokes the ghost of domesticity past. Her work is of its own time, as was that of her predecessors. But the history of domestic advice teaches us that Stewart has a genealogy, and that her work gets much of its meaning from its reliance on a shared understanding of the important ways that domesticity engages almost every aspect of American life. Martha Stewart's vast empire of entertaining, holiday preparations, household arrangements, paint color consulting, and recipe creating does have precedent. The preceding century of household advice included discussions on all of these subjects.

Stewart uses nostalgia on purpose. When she remembers her past, real or imagined, it gives readers a point of reference. Martha Stewart's "remembering" columns work because they are a link to the past, a link backwards in time. In fact, her entire repertoire is this type of link, looking backward to over a century of women writing about the home. Stewart takes up all the major themes of domestic advice over the past century and a half. For us, she is the end game; she has gathered up all of this knowledge and opened up the field to a wider audience, with a media saturation that was unavailable to her predecessors. These binaries—here's history, here's Martha—are meant to suggest that Stewart has taken different threads of domestic advice and woven them together. Here are just a few examples, then, of the ways in which Martha Stewart's empire builds on what came before.

Domestic advice texts from the mid- to late-nineteenth century invariably included references to religion and patriotism. To nineteenth-century writers, indeed, the home was a center of both these ideals. Martha Stewart, in 2001, agrees with this (what some would consider old-fashioned) sentiment. Stewart's readers are different than Beecher and Stowe's in their religious make-up, and Stewart certainly does not advocate a belief in Jesus Christ, as Beecher and Stowe did repeatedly. However, Stewart's emphasis on both Christmas and Easter in her magazine address the longevity of the idea that religious icons, crafts, and ceremonies belong in the household setting. Stewart tempers her Christmas ideas with recipes for Hanukkah chocolates and Kwanzaa meals and includes instructions for a matzah cover to go alongside Easter egg decorating. But the religious emphasis—though multicultural—still has tethers to the nineteenth-century, when Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *An American Woman's Home* of 1869 included a chapter called "A Christian House."

Compare the drawing of Beecher and Stowe's "Christian House" to Martha Stewart's decorated home for July 4th, 1999. In Beecher and Stowe's 1869 text, the frontispiece to this particular chapter depicted an orderly, well-proportioned house—bearing a cross on the outside to properly identify it as Christian—on a flowing stream.¹ Sparse window curtains provided the only clue to the interior, but the happy family outdoors indicated that the house emanated the proper feelings. The family, working together and strolling in the garden, was fulfilled precisely because of the house that took up most of the image. In Martha Stewart's

article “Flags” in the July/August 1999 issue of *Martha Stewart Living*, the article notes: “Magnificent both in what it stands for and in how it looks, the flag is synonymous with the ideals on which this country was founded.”² The photographs accompanying the article display a home festooned with American flags. Stewart has placed the emblem of faith directly on the outside of the home.

In the late-nineteenth century, domestic advisors began to include information about the science and technology of the household. Their goal was to bring a rationalized approach to household decorating and management, and to bring male-dominated systems of learning to women. In 1887, for example, home economists and scientists Ellen Richards and Marion Talbot printed a drawing of “A Plan of the System of Pipes in the House” along with an accompanying essay by a fellow home-economist in their book *Home Sanitation*. These women made the claim that a “scientific and thorough understanding of sanitation, as well as of hygiene, is the only solid foundation of successful effort” in homemaking.³ The drawing showed three related pipe networks, and demonstrated the ways that water entered and left the home. In an article entitled “Plumbing Repairs” in the February 1996 issue of *Martha Stewart Living*, the modern magazine went over much the same information.⁴ Though in the one hundred-plus years since Richards and Talbot’s book, some of the specific information changed, the basic idea remained the same: American women needed a forum in which to be taught basic information relating to the smooth operation of the household. Domesticity, thought both late-nineteenth-century and late-twentieth-century writers, should include the study of pipes.

Home economists of the early-twentieth century tried to revolutionize the kitchen, and bring it into modernity with values such as cleanliness and efficiency. Contributors to the 1931 volume *The Better Homes Manual* praised the kitchen of home-efficiency expert Lillian Gilbreth. A note from Hildegard Kneeland of the U.S. Bureau of Home Economics noted that the kitchen included a circular work space and convenient table heights, so as to achieve a “true home laboratory.”⁵ Martha Stewart’s editors took this idea to heart when, over six decades later, they included an article on a kitchen that used factory and laboratory furniture. The September 1995 issue of *Martha Stewart Living* included an article recommending efficiency furniture “for utility, durability, and good, clean looks.” The laboratory tables were “rationalized by experience to the simplest lines, greatest ease of use, highest safety standards, and lowest maintenance.”⁶

Along with kitchen efficiency came modernization for the entire household. The domestic advice literature of the 1930s and 1940s is filled with books such as Dorothy Raley’s *A Century of Progress* of 1934. Raley raved about the furniture seen at the World’s Fair of 1933, gushing, “this Machine-Age . . . has come to stay. It is based on Economy, Efficiency, and Beauty. [This furniture will] completely change the old time concept of the Home . . . because they are Modern in the Nth degree.”⁷ The modern aesthetic remained in the domestic

lexicon of furniture for many decades, and found an ally at *Martha Stewart Living* in 1999, with an article on metal furniture that resembled the showings at the 1933 fair. “I love the simple and pure lines of the furniture,” says Martha. “This furniture is perfectly suited to meet the needs of the modern home. Anonymous as it is, this mass-produced furniture is carefully, sensibly, and thoughtfully made.”⁸ Again and again *Martha Stewart Living* has praised modern furniture, most significantly in an article about Stewart’s daughter Alexis’s complete remodeling of her New York apartment. The domestic advisors of the 1930s, who believed that the household was the perfect outlet for an expression of modern sensibilities, would approve.

Color—on wallpaper, carpets, and lithographs—appeared in nineteenth-century domestic advice manuals, but homes truly burst into color in the early-twentieth century. Domestic advice manuals of mid-century such as Helen Koues’ *The American Woman’s New Encyclopedia of Home Decorating* described the obsession of her age: “Color is vital! It is the background against which we live. . . . This is an age of color.”⁹ In the 1940s and 1950s, most domestic advice manuals included color wheels, and advisors noted the ways that color could transform the whole feeling of a room. *Martha Stewart Living* celebrated color in the home from its first issue, but when Martha Stewart introduced her line of 256 Everyday Colors at Kmart in 1997, the magazine began to emphasize the way that “Color can . . . be used to give each room a distinct character.”¹⁰ Highlighting unusual colors such as pink and brown, Martha Stewart’s magazine celebrates the increased availability of affordable paints with lessons on the psychology of color.

In domestic advice manuals, the past is always part of the decorating scheme. Even as domestic advisors tried to lure their readers into the future with new materials and new colors, they emphasized the debt of all Americans to their honorable past. American colonialism, beginning as early as the Colonial Kitchen at the 1876 Centennial in Philadelphia, has been a strong character in domestic advice manuals ever since. Mary Northend wrote lovingly about her New England ancestors in the early-twentieth century, and photographed rooms for her many books in ways that she thought the colonists would have lived. “There is a charm about old furnishings,” she wrote, “that cannot fail to appeal to all lovers of the quaint and interesting.”¹¹ To her, colonial-era New England homes and their furnishings and accessories “will remain forevermore as revelations of the sturdy spirit, the breadth of mind, the gracious hospitality, and the fine ideals of our forefathers who built them.”¹²

Though Martha Stewart explores other American cultures—such as midwest farms and Texas ranches—she, too, holds a special fascination for colonial America. The November 1997 issue of *Martha Stewart Living* included a lavishly photographed article on pewter. “Nothing connects us to the tables and traditions of colonial America quite like the warm satiny touch of this lustrous metal,” read the piece. “History and pewter are as inseparable as the metals that

make the alloy."¹³ Martha Stewart uses colonial America, and many other different, region-specific cultures, in her magazine to point out the differences between our times and theirs, to introduce her readers to a historical context for the items they might find at flea markets and antique shows, and to celebrate American history.

Children have been an important facet of domestic advice throughout its history. Catharine Beecher included projects for children in her nineteenth-century text, and manuals for the past 150 years have followed this tradition, to include—and indoctrinate—children into the cult of domesticity. In the 1960s, a prolific era for decorating and entertaining texts, *Better Homes and Gardens Guide to Entertaining* introduced the kid's table. In this 1969 text, parents were instructed to "turn Christmas Eve supper over to your children. It's easy for the kids to make the sandwiches. . . . The youngsters will enjoy their active role in the evening's festivities and learn how to be gracious hosts and hostesses."¹⁴ The holiday became a lesson in domesticity. Thirty years later, in the November 1999 issue of *Martha Stewart Living*, Stewart recommended a similar children's table for Thanksgiving. Her craft ideas were both "festive and informative, so as kids sit down to dinner, they can learn about the cooking habits, clothing, and customs of the men and women who shaped our nation. Ask the children to help decorate. Such cooperation lies at the heart of the Thanksgiving holiday."¹⁵ From religion to patriotism, from modernity to nostalgia, domesticity is thus passed on from generation to generation.

Martha Stewart's success becomes more interesting as we see her as the continuation of a genre that has taken different forms over the decades but has consistently brought the promise of middle-class success through domesticity to American women. The reason Martha Stewart looks so familiar once we learn the genealogy of domestic advice is that she is a direct descendent of what came before. Her ideas have roots, just as our desire to listen to and learn from her has precedent. As the other roundtable presentations make evident, Stewart's body of work addresses American icons from Christmas decorating to Kmart shopping. Her role as a commentator, explorer—even exploiter—of American ideology has a firm place in this culture, and her work invites layered discussions about the role of domesticity in today's world.

Notes

1. Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home; or, Principles of Domestic Science* (New York, 1869), 23.
2. Amy Conway, "Flags," *Martha Stewart Living* (July/August 1999), 135.
3. Annie E. Allen, "Sanitary Work for Women," in *Home Sanitation*, Ellen Richards and Marion Talbot, eds. (Boston, 1911), 71.
4. William L. Hamilton, "Plumbing Repairs," *Martha Stewart Living* (February 1996), 52.
5. Blanche Halbert, ed. *The Better Homes Manual* (Chicago, 1931), 475.
6. William L. Hamilton, "Is there a Doctor in the House?" *Martha Stewart Living* (September 1995), 109-110.
7. Dorothy Raley, ed. *A Century of Progress: Homes and Furnishings* (Chicago, 1934), 6.
8. Glenn Peake, "Metal Furniture," *Martha Stewart Living* (May 1999), 200.
9. Helen Koues, *The American Woman's New Encyclopedia of Home Decorating* (Garden City, N.Y., 1954), 4.

10. Celia Barbour, "Color from Room to Room," *Martha Stewart Living* (April 1997), 148.
11. Mary H. Northend, *Colonial Homes and Their Furnishings* (Boston, 1912), 92.
12. Mary H. Northend, *Historic Homes of New England* (Boston, 1914), 263.
13. Suzanne Charlé, "Pewter," *Martha Stewart Living* (November 1997), 190.
14. *Better Homes and Gardens' Guide to Entertaining* (Des Moines, Iowa, 1969), 104.
15. Jennifer Pirtle, "Entertaining: Kids' Tables," *Martha Stewart Living* (November 1999),