

Decorative Hardware *of the* Victorian Era *An American Perspective*

By Raheel Ahmad

The history, as well as growth, of antique decorative hardware has been a topic of debate and discussion for a long time. It has often been interlinked with the architectural developments and historical timelines. Many times, such linkages throw light on several invisible aspects of the human development during a particular period of history. Although a small part of the building, these small and intricate pieces of mostly metallic embellishments on our doors and windows tell us a lot more than any other feature of a structure. Partly because this hardware is, more often than not, referred to by the historical period to which it belongs and is among the few things that come in close contact with the inhabitants almost every day.

The American Perspective

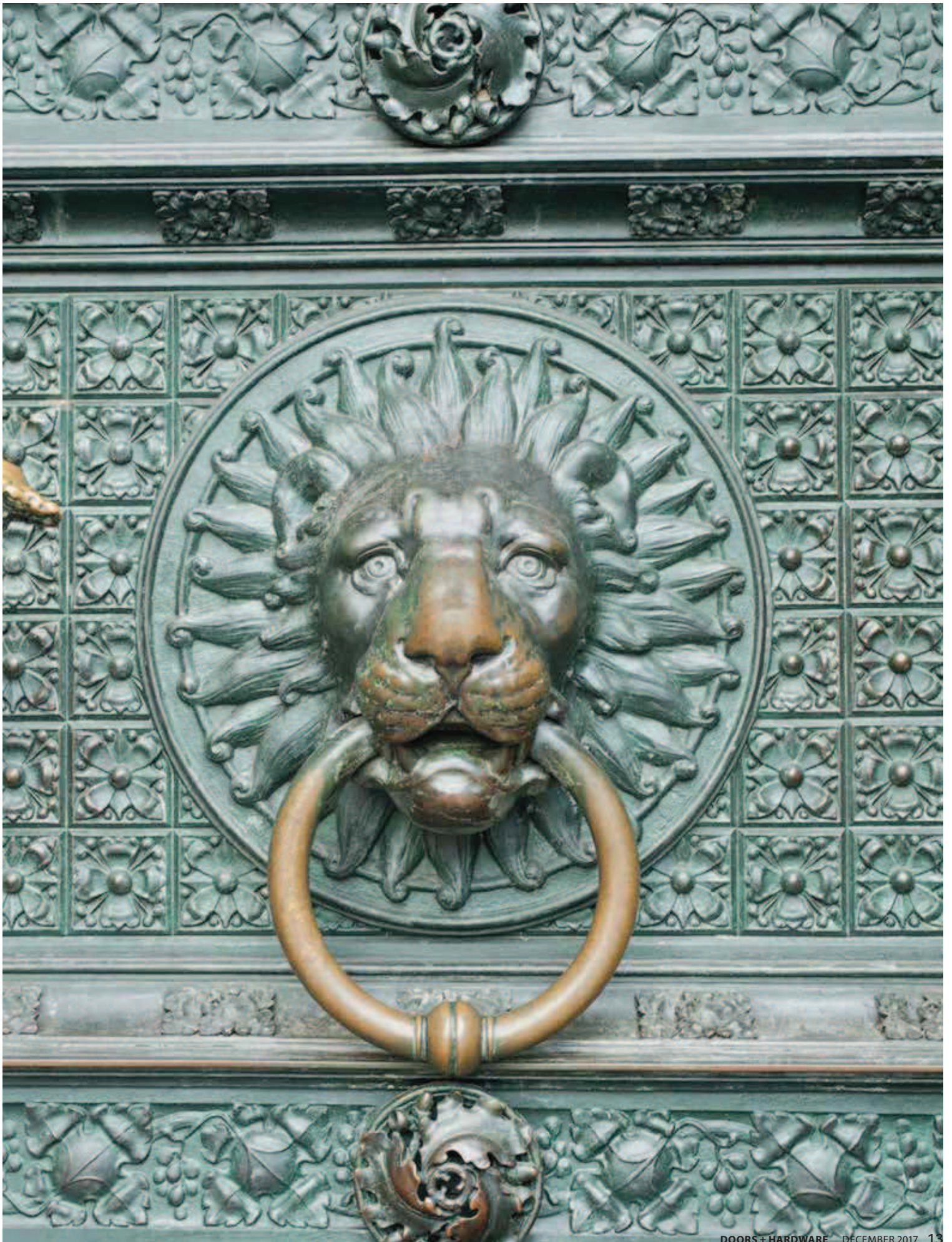
In American architectural history, the Victorian era during the late nineteenth century is best known for its intricate designs and decorative style. No doubt, it has a definitive and special place among the vast array of architectural designs and decorative hardware styles. The period portrays the embellishments of the architectural marvels of the mid-19th century to early 20th century. It makes a very insightful academic study, as well as an interesting topic for general discussion.

According to British history, the Victorian era is the period of Queen Victoria's reign during 1837-1901. It is characterized as a period of peace, prosperity, refined sensibilities and national self-confidence in Britain.

However, in America, the Victorian era is considered as the period from the 1860s to 1900. The architectural styles and the hardware used during that period are referred as Victorian era.

There are several sub-styles of the Victorian era, such as the Second Empire, Romanesque Revival, Victorian Gothic, Queen Anne, Stick/Eastlake, Shingle, Renaissance Revival and Chateausque. But going into details of each one of them would require a huge amount of space, effort and of course, time. So, primarily in this article I will focus only on the broader aspects of Victorian era hardware.

According to Nancy E. Berry, an accomplished journalist and editor of a popular luxury lifestyle magazine in the U.S., the artistic sensibilities



of the Victorian era gave rise to the decorative hardware industry's growth. It was during this period that the concept of extending a building's general design into its details and fittings came into existence. This was a major shift from the earlier periods' functional approach of the architectural hardware.

In her book, *Architectural Hardware*, she mentions the ornamental inspiration for hardware designs came from every corner of the globe. As far as the Victorian era was concerned, America mostly followed the developments in England. The designers of that time, whom she refers to as Victorian-era tastemakers, basically began shaping the styles in American homes. The popularity of Victorian era architecture and the hardware grew by leaps and bounds in America.

Distinct Features of Victorian Era Hardware

The distinctive hardware of the Victorian era include different types of door and cabinet hardware, locks, hinges, pocket door hardware, push, pull, kick plates, bolts, stops, knobs, trim, strikes, and keys. The material used for producing hardware during this era was mostly brass, which is quite easy to work with, especially when it comes to intricate designs. Other materials such as iron and bronze were also used during this period.

One of the key features of the Victorian style door entry sets is they portray lavish beauty at the entrance of the building. Both charming and elegant, the beautiful and intricate designs of the Victorian push plates make them conversation pieces. The delightfully decorative designs of the brass hinges of the Victorian era portray their passion for elegance. The stylized vines, patterned barrel, and distinctive steeple finials perfectly accent the most formal interiors.

Hardwood door stoppers were also quite popular in the Victorian era. Round, fluted and octagonal door knobs in glass or porcelain with brass shanks also gained popularity during this era. Beautiful round rosettes, keyholes and back plates of Victorian designs are still very much sought after within antique reproduction hardware. The cabinet hardware designs of the era included ornate pulls, latches, locks, fasteners and similar items.

The U.S. Market

There is a fairly well-established restoration hardware industry in the U.S. that caters to the needs of the growing

popularity of this segment. Several companies specialize in antique and decorative hardware while many of them deal exclusively in Victorian-era hardware. This signifies the importance of this era in the antique and restoration hardware space. Although with the rapid industrial automation and mass production, the actual beauty of the hardware is fast losing its charm, yet the ornate designs still manage to delight the aesthetic eye.

During my recent visit to the U.S., I traveled across different parts of the country to get a deeper understanding of the antique and decorative hardware market there. The dominant aspect that emerged upon me from this experience was that Victorian architectural style still holds sway in the American historical architectural landscape; particularly in the west coast, as well many other parts of the country.

For some reason, California appears to have embraced the Victorian era architecture much more enthusiastically than any other state. The cities of San Francisco and Los Angeles are well-endowed with the Victorian era designs. Interestingly, in his book, *Beautiful America's California Victorians*, the author Kenneth Naversen paints an elaborate picture of how and why the Victorian architecture continues to be so popular. He mentions that despite the continuous and rapacious development that has dominated its modern history, California possesses what is arguably the finest collection of well-preserved Victorian homes in the country. Ironically, I did not come across such historical finesse in New York City but am sure it has its own distinct taste for antique hardware.

Each period in history leaves a unique imprint and the same holds true for the Victorian era. The beautiful vestiges of the periods not only let people have a glimpse of the glorious past but also allow them to immerse themselves into the grandeur. I had often wondered why people are so fascinated by historical architecture and culture, but when I started studying this aspect a few years ago, my own fascination grew tenfold as I tried to delve deeper and deeper. To date, I find it difficult to arrive at a conclusive end. Historical architecture and restoration continues to bring a new dimension each time I think about the beautiful architectural heritage, particularly of the Victorian era and its hardware.

RAHEEL AHMAD is Director of Global Metal Company. He can be reached at Raheel@globalmetal.in.