

Dorm Décor

Student style from the Gilded Age to the cyber era

by WESTON M. HILL

"To me [my room] will always be haunted by my companions who have been there, by the books that I have read there, by the pleasure and the pain that I have felt there, and by a laughing group of bright, fresh faces, that have rendered it sunny in my eyes for ever. I have learned there what College really is. I have learned there one part of the great secret of life."

~from "My Old Room,"

by HENRY ADAMS, class of 1858

LAST WINTER, I came upon the picture at right, of a Harvard student room from the 1870 class album. I was struck by its décor, especially the profusion of detail: the figured wallpaper, the Oriental rugs and polished desks, the company of busts on mantel and table alike, and the framed artwork blanketing the walls and surrounding the serious faces of students in suits. That image was so unlike the rooms I knew as a student in the early 1990s, first in Wigglesworth





H-11 and later in Kirkland H-24. My rooms had a less formal character altogether: broken couches and drab computers, bunk beds and boom boxes, rattling radiators, and white plastered walls spotted with globs of gum—evidence of posters and photos long since fallen.

Nine months later, I am working on a book documenting Harvard dorm life. As I visit today's rooms (filled with high-tech electronics) in my search for connections to the past, I find common ground in the rooms and their occupants from all eras, and in the tales of dorm fires and fights, quiet moments and lively debates, secret meetings and wild parties, rowdy rebellions and legendary pranks—like the Kirkland roommates in 1947 who woke up to find a live skunk in their closet. I hope those viewing these images will share their pictures and stories, so we may reconnect and learn from one another “what College really is.”

Weston M. Hill '94 has been a teaching fellow for General Education 105, Robert Coles's "The Literature of Social Reflection," for six years. He encourages alumni to contribute photographs, stories, poems, or other creations for the project; see his website, www.crimsondormlife.com, for more information.

Opposite: Sketch of the room occupied by George E. Boyden and Otis Chickering, November, 1858. Drawn by George E. Boyden

Above: The most elaborate image from a group of photographs of student rooms that were reproduced in the 1870 class album



Above: A 1905 photograph of Hollis 28, then the room of Cleveland Morse '07 (and later the room of Joseph P. Kennedy '12)

Right: Radcliffe room, 1936. "Not for us those Harvard entries and suites with bathrooms and fireplaces," wrote Perdita Buchan '62 of Radcliffe's more austere housing (see "Cliffe Notes," May-June, page 16).

Opposite, top: The 1940s, complete with then high-tech hi-fi

Opposite, bottom: Bunk beds and overcrowding in 1952 as the College population swelled in the aftermath of World War II



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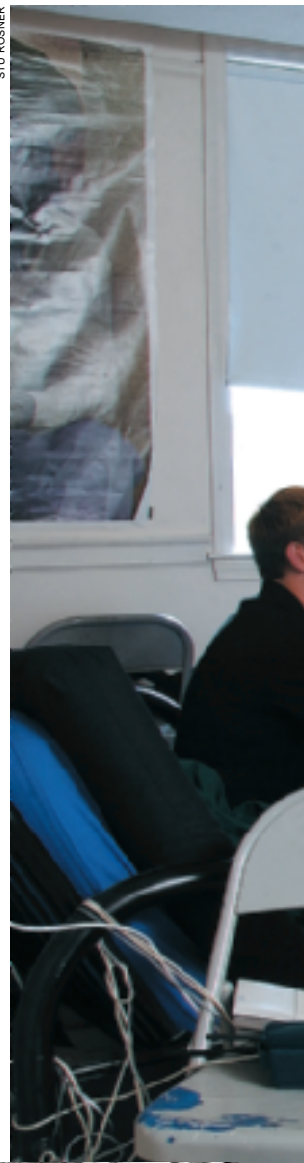
“In short, my room is the coldest, the dirtiest, and the gloomiest in Cambridge.... But what do I care for the cold, so long as a good fire burns in the grate?”

~from “My Old Room”

Henry Adams lived in Holworthy 5. His essay, “My Old Room,” and that of A.A. Hayes (quoted on page 47) appeared in an earlier *Harvard Magazine*, which was published by undergraduates from 1854 to 1864. The magazine claimed “only to be the exponent of the thoughts and feelings of the students of Harvard College.” The Adams essay appeared in the September 1856 issue, the Hayes essay the following month.



STU ROSNER



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Above: The 1960s

Right: A 1973 precursor to the now-popular loft. In a March 1972 column in this magazine, Anne Fadiman '74 described contemporary trends in undergraduate décor: the Psychedelic-Iguana School, the Blood-and-Guts School, the Decadent-Aesthetic School, and—most typical, perhaps—the Fallen Sights School.



HARVARD COLLEGE YEARBOOK, 1973



Above: Cabot F-52 in 2002, the room of then seniors (clockwise from right) Gerard Hammond, John Bingaman, Joshua Raffaelli, and Brian Clay

“Thus, whatever be the season or weather, you can always find enjoyment and comfort in College rooms. There is a kind of independence about a residence in them which can never be acquired elsewhere. Until very recently, one could even exercise his propensity for destructiveness on the venerable walls and doors, and the only result would be an increase of a cent or two in that vague item on the term-bill, ‘Special repairs by general average.’”

~from “My Room,”
by AUGUSTUS ALLEN HAYES, class of 1857