

Victorian picture rails

Display treasures in a form both historic and practical

BY LAURI KRAMER SERAFIN

Historic trends and practical displays intersect with one Victorian-era feature. Picture rails, a form of decorative moulding held at the top of a wall, double as both a charming addition and avenue to display framed pictures or mirrors. Pieces can be hung with movable hooks, with rearrangement made easy and no need to put holes in walls.

This moulding first appeared in the 1840s, in the early Victorian period. Picture railing is traditionally mounted in different positions depending on ceiling height. In homes with high ceilings of over 10 feet, the horizontal picture rail is hung about 11 to 16 inches below the top of the wall. This forms an important decorative frieze portion of the wall.

An alternative installation is the height of the door head, which leaves a frieze area between the rail and the ceiling. Between 1915 and 1940 with lower ceilings, the picture rail was hung about 1/2 to 3/4 of an inch from

the top of the wall to allow room for hanging hooks.

The Flavel House, constructed in the 1880s, has an alternative picture rail system. Metal tubing was installed under a wide decorative plaster cove molding. This is an original feature of the house and was likely gilded in the past, an ingenious way to hang heavy mirrors and paintings.

While many homes have left their picture rails intact, others have since been replaced. For a restoration project, this historic moulding is readily available at lumber and salvage yards. City Lumber Co. in Astoria and other lumber yards sell the most common picture rail moulding in hemlock by the foot.

The pieces can be lightly sanded, primed and painted. Historically, many different styles and widths of picture rail have been used. The Forsstrom House has a larger picture rail moulding than most available today, though I have found matching pieces at a Portland salvage yard to replace missing sections.

Reproduction hooks of many styles and finishes can be purchased online, with both

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Lauri Kramer Serafin

An antique piano mirror sits over an 1895 piano in the music room of the Forsstrom House.