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## EMILY J. ORLANDO

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### “Perilous Coquetry”: Oscar Wilde’s Influence on Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman, Jr.

“[T]he most perilous coquetry may not be in a woman’s way of arranging her dress but in her way of arranging her drawing-room.”

—Edith Wharton, “New Year’s Day”

“I find it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china.”

—attributed to Oscar Wilde

*The Decoration of Houses* (1897), co-written with the architect Ogden Codman, Jr., put Edith Wharton on the map as an authority on domestic aesthetics at the turn of the twentieth century. A kind of decorating guide for the wealthy set, the design manual “launched Wharton into contemporary architectural discourse and allied her with a sociocultural movement at once old guard and reformist, aesthetically neoclassical and civicly progressive.”<sup>1</sup> The volume distinguished her as a writer highly attuned to aesthetics, form, taste, and a reverence for what she and Codman called “the best models.” These are all concerns that powerfully inform the critically and commercially successful realist fiction for which Wharton would, by the publication of *The House of Mirth* (1905), become famous. The “perilous coquetry” marking Lizzie Hazeldean’s drawing-room (“New Year’s Day”), Newland Archer’s “glazed black-walnut bookcases” (*The Age of Innocence*), and the François Boucher tapestries that read as dollar signs to Undine Spragg’s acquisitive eyes (*The Custom of the Country*) all assume new meaning when read in the context of this book. For twenty-first-century readers enchanted by the “life-changing magic”<sup>2</sup> of home beautification, *The Decoration of Houses* resonates as a treatise on the possibilities afforded by sound house design and decoration.

As it happens, another impeccably dressed arbiter of taste also made his American debut dispensing advice on interior décor. Oscar Wilde, then twenty-seven years old and known mostly as a velvet-clad poet and personality, lectured across North America on house decoration in 1882.<sup>3</sup> The most successful of Wilde’s talks, “The House Beautiful” was first presented

in February 1882 in Chicago under the name “Interior and Exterior House Decoration” and was delivered at least fifteen times in the United States and subsequently during Wilde’s tours in England, Scotland, and Ireland over the next four years.<sup>4</sup> Wilde formally adopted the title “The House Beautiful” when he reached California in April 1882. Wilde seems not to have intended to publish his lectures and no manuscript save for a brief fragment of “The House Beautiful” survives. The lecture was, however, extensively reproduced in newspapers across the United States. As Kevin H. F. O’Brien notes, “‘The House Beautiful’ was perhaps Wilde’s most effective lecture in America. Practical, colloquial, and witty, it received the best reviews from newspaper critics.”<sup>5</sup> Further, Michèle Mendelssohn has noted that “the newspaper coverage of Wilde’s visit to Washington was extensive and in-depth. Long passages from the lectures were reprinted.”<sup>6</sup>

Wilde did not, of course, invent the phrase “house beautiful.” In the 1880s, it was most closely associated with Clarence Cook’s American interior design manual by that name—*The House Beautiful: Essays on Beds and Tables, Stools and Candlesticks* (1878). Cook’s book was reprinted in 1879, 1881, and 1895.<sup>7</sup> Cook’s *The House Beautiful*, which was second only to the widely read and reprinted Charles Eastlake’s *Hints on Household Taste*, is the very sort of sentimental and non-scholarly model from which Wharton and Codman wished to distance themselves in publishing *The Decoration of Houses*. Wilde seems to be capitalizing on Cook’s success in naming his lecture “The House Beautiful.” Cook was in turn borrowing the title from Walter Pater, who used the phrase “house beautiful” in 1876 to describe the idea that “the creative minds of all generations . . . are always building together.”<sup>8</sup> Pater took the phrase from John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, an association that broadcasts the moral implications of the term. As Marcus Waithe has noted, “the ‘house beautiful’ is more commonly interpreted as an allusion to . . . the design philosophy of William Morris.” But a key distinction is that the ideas associated with Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement were far removed from Wilde’s later statements on the disconnect between art and morality.<sup>9</sup> By 1896—at which time scandal had removed Wilde from public life—“House Beautiful” was the name of an American periodical devoted to interior décor and edited by Eugene Klapp and Henry B. Harvey. To readers of the 1880s and 1890s, then, “house beautiful” was associated with domestic elegance and taste, pursued not merely for art’s sake.

When he toured North America in 1882, Oscar Wilde had yet to pen *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) or the comedies that would make him a household name. Wilde also had impressively little first-hand experience with interior design.<sup>10</sup> As such Wilde’s lecture tour was characterized by his own brand of “coquetry”—arguably “perilous,” to use Wharton’s phrase—in-

sofar as he was flirting with the role of aesthetic authority without investing the hours of formal study or apprenticeship that might earn him credibility. Still, Wilde, never known for his modesty, insisted in an 1882 letter that he had “something to say to the American people . . . that . . . will be the beginning of a great movement” and declared his commitment to “art and refinement and civilization.”<sup>11</sup>

Art, refinement, and civilization also formed something of a holy trinity for Wharton and Codman. Although there is no record that either of them personally interacted with Wilde, there would have been numerous occasions for them to do so in New York, Boston, Newport, or abroad, and Wharton and Codman surely were well aware of Wilde by 1882.<sup>12</sup> In January 8 of that year, the New York *World* reported that Wilde was staying “in his new home in Twenty-eighth Street,”<sup>13</sup> a region that hosted many of the gentlemen’s clubs Codman would frequent in New York and that was not far removed from the vicinity where Wharton’s circle resided.<sup>14</sup> The immensely influential socialite Mrs. Paran Stevens,<sup>15</sup> mother of Wharton’s then fiancé Harry Stevens, entertained Wilde at dinner parties during his 1882 visit to New York.<sup>16</sup> Mrs. Stevens, who spent summers presiding over the ornate “Paran Stevens Villa” on Bellevue Avenue from 1865 onward, was present at Wilde’s visit to the Newport home of Julia Ward Howe and stands as a heretofore unacknowledged link uniting Wharton, Codman, and Wilde. In fact, it was American women—not men—who did the most to embrace Wilde during his visit to America.<sup>17</sup> Further, Wilde’s July 1882 visit to Newport overlapped with Wharton’s summer residence in that city.<sup>18</sup> (Edith’s engagement to Harry Stevens was formally announced in the papers in August 1882 and called off in October of that year.)<sup>19</sup> And while financial circumstances compelled the Codman family to remove to France in 1872, returning to Massachusetts in 1884, the young Codman independently relocated to Boston in late 1882 to live with his uncle, the architect John Hubbard Sturgis.<sup>20</sup> My point, then, is that, given their shared interests in house design and décor, places of residence, and mutual acquaintances, it is highly possible and even probable that Codman and/or Wharton attended one of Wilde’s 1882 lectures on house decoration or met him at one of many dinner parties hosted in his honor. Certainly both Codman and Wharton had access to a printed copy of Wilde’s lecture “The House Beautiful.” Given that Codman’s 1882 letters to his mother from abroad show him to be keeping up with the *Nation* and *Scribner’s*, it stands to reason that Codman would have been well informed of Wilde’s tour. (Regrettably, Wharton’s letters from the 1880s do not survive.) By the 1890s, when Wharton and Codman were collaborating on *The Decoration of Houses*, Wilde was still closely associated

with house decoration.<sup>21</sup> Both Wharton and Codman would become great admirers of Wilde's writing.<sup>22</sup>

Wilde, Wharton, and Codman shared a number of affinities—good art, literature, clothes, and china (and the aplomb to define taste in such matters); a well-turned phrase; and the careful marketing of their own brand and photographic image, as evident in their meticulously staged portraits. All three would marry, witness the dissolution of that marriage, and experience extramarital erotic fulfillment. (Wilde's marriage to Constance Lloyd would come to an abrupt end with the exposure of his affair with Lord Alfred Douglas, Wharton's ill-matched union with Teddy Wharton would conclude in divorce, and Codman's brief marriage to Leila Griswold would end with her death in 1910.) All three would become expatriates who chose France as a final resting place. While more than one source credits Edith Wharton for having "created the term 'interior decorator,'"<sup>23</sup> neither Wharton nor Wilde were formally trained in architecture or design. Codman, for his part, abandoned architectural studies at what is now MIT without taking a degree. Although *The Decoration of Houses* makes no mention of Wilde's lectures on interior décor, nor do the letters or biographies, the book Wharton wrote with Codman echoes, engages, and advances many of Wilde's ideas. In fact, this essay will argue that Wilde's lecture served as a meaningful but unacknowledged influence on *The Decoration of Houses*. Given his championing of women's interventions in the sphere of domestic aesthetics, Wilde arguably helped pave the way for Wharton's contributions to the field of interior design.

While both design treatises speak specifically to late-nineteenth-century Americans, a considerable gulf separates Wilde's lecture-hall audience from the readership of *The Decoration of Houses*. Wilde insists in "House Decoration" that he has no interest in reaching "those millionaires who can pillage Europe for their pleasure."<sup>24</sup> Mendelssohn describes this lecture as "Wilde's 'walking tour of the typical bourgeois household' which allowed Wilde to become a consummate guide by absorbing aesthetic decoration into an emerging 'system of values and attitudes, associated with a variety of movements in art and society.'"<sup>25</sup> The Irish-born Wilde, then, who in his lecture frequently speaks of England as if he is a native and would seemingly have the listener forget his Dublin roots, can be said to be rewriting the domestic aesthetic for the middle class and as such participating in a kind of "imagined community" à la Benedict Anderson, as the national concept is constructed, for Anderson, largely around passing the values of the aristocracy on to the new emerging middle class "rulers" who would need to be able to possess taste, judgment, and discrimination.<sup>26</sup> The American middle class is exactly the impressionable group Wilde seeks to enlighten,

but given Wilde's Anglophile posture, one could more specifically argue that his tour is marked by ironic imperialist undertones insofar as he is trying to fashion an American middle class in the British national image.

Wharton and Codman, on the other hand, make it clear they hope to instruct the very pillaging millionaires who earn Wilde's disdain and thus rescue American domestic aesthetics from the "hopeless quagmire of vulgarity and wrongness"<sup>27</sup> into which they felt it had recently plummeted. *The Decoration of Houses* declares at the outset that "a reform in house-decoration" is desperately needed and that this reform must commence with "those whose means permit any experiments which their taste may suggest. When the rich man demands good architecture his neighbors will get it too." Wharton and Codman's book, then, is informed by a number of class assumptions—for example, that the reader could afford to import a carved ceiling from Italy, procure eighteenth-century furniture from France, and/or employ a houseful of servants. Their confidence in a kind of trickle-down aesthetics is clear when the authors state that "Every good moulding, every carefully studied detail . . . will in time find its way to the carpenter-built cottage" (xxi–xxii). Although Wharton and Codman acknowledge the ways in which their advice might inform the carpenter-built cottage, their readers were more inclined to erect the ostentatious Newport "cottages" for which the Vanderbilts and their peers were known. In fact, the conclusion of *The Decoration of Houses* takes to task the excesses of the Gilded Age, asserting that the "supreme excellence is simplicity. Moderation, fitness, relevance—these are the qualities that give permanence to the work of the great architects" (198). While Wharton and Codman admired the grand Italian Renaissance villas and palaces, they advised readers to turn to eighteenth-century France or England for proper models for the private home. That particular directive may well have been aimed at the Vanderbilts, whom Wharton knew and to whom she introduced Codman. The Vanderbilts were responsible, for example, for such august and ostentatious "cottages" as the Breakers in Newport and the Vanderbilt Mansion in Hyde Park. In fact, on Wharton's recommendation, Codman oversaw the interior design of the second floor of the Breakers, his refined, streamlined style contrasting starkly with the overdone décor of the first floor. In a private letter to Codman, Wharton makes clear her conviction that the sort of wealth possessed by the Vanderbilts does not go hand in hand with taste: "I wish the Vanderbilts didn't retard culture so very thoroughly. They are entrenched in a sort of *Thermopylae* of bad taste, from which apparently no force on earth can dislodge them."<sup>28</sup> Wharton and Codman thus offered the book as a kind of corrective for the perverse and contrived mansions of the robber barons.

While the two design treatises target different classes, Wilde, Wharton, and Codman are united in the extent to which they had grown leery of the teachings of John Ruskin, premier art critic of the Victorian age. Although all three figures were early on meaningfully influenced by Ruskin, their treatises on interior décor work to forge a distance between themselves and the great sage's ideas. Wilde studied under Ruskin at Oxford in the 1870s. In a letter from early 1882, the year of his lecture tour, Wilde acknowledges his "new departure from Mr. Ruskin" which he not very humbly suggests marks "an era in the aesthetic movement."<sup>29</sup> Wilde was moving toward a model that undermined the moral function of art. As Waithe has noted, "Although the emphasis on interior design is maintained, this new affiliation [in Wilde] diminishes the influence of Ruskin and Morris by insisting on the amorality of art."<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, Wilde channels both Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle in the third paragraph of "The House Beautiful" when he utters the following to his North American listeners:

the great difficulty that stands in the way of your artistic development is not a lack of interest in art, nor a lack of love for art, but that you do not honor the handicraftsman sufficiently, and do not recognize him as you should; . . . you must reinstate him into his rightful position, and thus make labor, which is always honorable, noble also.<sup>31</sup>

Here Wilde takes considerable liberties in his familiar and authoritative address to his American audience—*your* artistic development, *you do not* honor, *you must* reinstate. The emphasis on the doctrine of work is indebted to Carlyle while the stress on art's nobility echoes Ruskin. Wilde's lecture likens beautiful homes to happy homes and celebrates art's potential to shape moral men, and this too aligns with the national and imperial mode. However, with his suggestion that the useful is beautiful and the beautiful useful, Wilde contradicts Ruskin who had argued in *The Stones of Venice* (1853) that "the most beautiful things in the world are the most useless: peacocks and lilies for instance."<sup>32</sup> The attitude also counters Théophile Gautier's notion, which inspired the art for art's sake movement, that "nothing is truly beautiful except that which can serve for nothing; whatever is useful is ugly."<sup>33</sup> Wilde would of course do an about face with his famous claim in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that "all art is quite useless,"<sup>34</sup> suggesting that he was turning from the hyper-moralism of Ruskin to the decadent self-indulgence of Pater which absolved the artist from moral responsibility. Still, Wilde in his lecture advocated what he called a "democratic art" by the people and for the people:

And so let it be for you to create an art that is made with the hands of the people, for the joy of the people too, . . . a democratic art, entering into the

houses of the people, making beautiful the simplest vessels they contain, for there is nothing in common life too mean, in common things too trivial to be ennobled by your touch, nothing in life that art cannot raise and sanctify.<sup>35</sup>

Here again, Wilde is clearly moralizing domestic aesthetics, but his rhetoric is often marked by such contradictions. As Matthew Hofer and Gary Scharnhorst have helpfully noted:

Although Wilde often paid lip service to the salutary influence of art on the working class, it seems that aestheticism as social theory endorsed not egalitarianism but rather a democracy of snobs.<sup>36</sup>

It is almost as though Wilde, in shifting his position on the extent to which art might “raise and sanctify” the masses, is appropriating the famous disclaimer of the American poet Walt Whitman, whom he deeply admired and with whom he visited on his U.S. tour: “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes).”

Wilde’s remarks in “The House Beautiful” on the ennobling influence of art look forward to Wharton and Codman’s statements on the link between art and morality. Here is Wilde in his 1882 lecture:

It is sometimes said that our art is opposed to good morals; but on the contrary, it fosters morality. Wars and the clash of arms and the meeting of men in battle must be always, but I think that art, by creating a common intellectual atmosphere between all countries might, if it could not overshadow the world with the silvery wings of peace, at least make men such brothers that they would not go out to slay one another for the whim or folly of some king or minister as they do in Europe; for national hatreds are always strongest where culture is lowest.<sup>37</sup>

Here Wilde takes a more cosmopolitan than imperialist position, though the two at least partially overlap, insofar as both, in their upper class or privileged versions, seek to impose sameness or define what is cultivated and what is civil. In “The House Beautiful” he goes on to emphasize that

the refining influence of art, begun in childhood, will be of the highest value to all of us in teaching our children to love what is beautiful and good, and hate what is evil and ugly. Then when a child grows up he learns that industrious we must be, but industry without art is simply barbarism.<sup>38</sup>

There is for Wilde a sense of moral urgency when he suggests that

Today more than ever the artist and a love of the beautiful are needed to temper and counteract the sordid materialism of the age. In an age when science has undertaken to declaim against the soul and spiritual nature of man, and when commerce is ruining beautiful rivers and magnificent woodlands and the glorious skies in its greed for gain, the artist comes forward as a priest



and prophet of nature to protest, and even to work against the prostitution or the perversion of what is lofty and noble in humanity and beautiful in the physical world, and his religion in its benefits to mankind is as broad and shining as the sun.<sup>39</sup>

Wilde harkens back to the British Romantic poets—specifically William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley—as he decries “the sordid materialism” and the havoc that “science,” “commerce,” and “greed for gain” have wreaked on the human soul in the Victorian age. He particularly echoes Wordsworth’s sonnet “The World Is Too Much With Us” (1802). Further, Wilde invokes Shelley’s “A Defence of Poetry” (1821) as he likens the artist to a kind of prophet who might save us from ourselves, though Wilde—very unlike Wordsworth and Shelley—puts more stock in the redeeming value of “a love of the beautiful” than in the artist himself. What is more, aestheticism, for which Wilde would become chief spokesperson, was accused of a kind of “prostitution or . . . perversion of what is lofty and noble in humanity” in its advocacy of the pursuit of the sensory—what Pater had called “ecstasy” and “a refined and comely decadence”—for the sake of pleasure itself.

In their chapter on the schoolroom and nurseries, Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman echo many of Wilde’s ideas on the importance of fostering in children an aesthetic sense. They advocate teaching the young to appreciate beauty in all its forms. “It is . . . never idle,” they insist, “to cultivate a child’s taste.” Indeed, they assert:

To teach a child to distinguish between a good and a bad painting, a well or an ill-modelled statue, need not hinder his growth in other directions, and will at least develop those habits of observation and comparison that are the base of all sound judgments. It is in this sense that the study of art is of service to those who have no special aptitude for any of its forms: its indirect action in shaping aesthetic criteria constitutes its chief value as an element of culture. (174)

Like Wilde, Wharton and Codman recognize the importance of discerning between the beautiful and the ugly. In fact, the two American authors are so committed to recognizing ugliness that the term surfaces thirty times in *The Decoration of Houses*. The authors note, for example, that “There are but two ways of dealing with a room which is fundamentally ugly: one is to accept it, and the other is courageously to correct its ugliness. Half-way remedies are a waste of money and serve rather to call attention to the defects of the room than to conceal them” (30). The syntax and sentiment unequivocally identify Wharton as the voice behind that particular line, which looks forward to her assessment of the “fatally poor,” “dingy,” and “unmarriageable” Miss Gerty Farish of *The House of Mirth* (1905). In an

epigram worthy of Wilde himself, Wharton's narrator notes of Miss Farish that "it is almost as stupid to let your clothes betray that you know you are ugly as to have them proclaim that you think you are beautiful."<sup>40</sup> In other words, as with fashion, so with interior décor: avoid calling attention to the "fundamentally ugly."

Although Wharton cites her discovery of John Ruskin in her father's library as a formative moment in her aesthetic development, she and Codman take Ruskin and other medievalists to task in *The Decoration of Houses* for their promotion of asymmetry. In Chapter 3, which focuses on the treatment of walls, Wharton and Codman elevate symmetry to a chief virtue at the expense of dismissing Ruskin: "If proportion is the good breeding of architecture," they write, then "symmetry, or the answering of one part to another, may be defined as the sanity of decoration." They proceed to praise symmetry as "one of the most inveterate of human instincts" (34). The very phrase raises the philosophical issue of whether forms (social, aesthetic, and so on) are inherent or socially constructed. Wharton and Codman, inclining to the former, argue that Anglo-Saxons have been led astray by Ruskin, who undermined symmetry to the peril of his followers:

As a guide through the byways of art, Mr. Ruskin is entitled to the reverence and gratitude of all; but as a logical exponent of the causes and effects of the beauty he discovers, his authority is certainly open to question. For years he has spent the full force of his unmatched prose in denouncing the enormity of putting a door or a window in a certain place in order that it may correspond to another; nor has he scrupled to declare to the victims of this practice that it leads to abysses of moral as well as of artistic degradation. (33–34)

In light of their preference for a neoclassical style, symmetry emerges as a virtue that Wharton and Codman consider essential to sound interior décor. As such, the esteemed Ruskin's authority is "certainly open to question" and he is denounced by Wharton and Codman for leading his devotees down a path inviting "abysses of moral as well as of artistic degradation" (34).<sup>41</sup>

Wilde, by contrast, is far less convinced than Wharton and Codman that symmetry stands as a moral correlative. The only time Wilde mentions symmetry in "The House Beautiful" is in his celebration of the lines marking Queen Anne furniture, which he advises his American audiences to acquire. He praises it as "good furniture made by refined people for refined people" that is "as beautiful as any that can be found in Italy."<sup>42</sup> He insists Queen Anne furniture is durable and

most comfortable too: what seem to be stiff and straight lines are really very delicately curved lines, *exquisite in their symmetry*, and while the cushion of the modern chair is a monster of iron springs, that of the Queen Anne period slopes

back and is made to fit the figure, which gives great ease and thereby combines comfort and beauty. . . . Modern furniture should be better than the old, with all our improved machinery and our great variety of woods to choose, but it is not.<sup>43</sup>

Here Wilde suggests that while one would think the industrial age would yield a better and more comfortable furniture, it has failed to do so. He proceeds to speak knowingly on the appropriate style of furniture for American homes:

avoid the “early English” or Gothic furniture; the Gothic . . . is really so heavy and massive that it is out of place when surrounded with the pretty things which we of this age love to gather around us; it was very well for those who lived in castles and who needed occasionally to use it as a means of defence or as a weapon of war. A lighter and more graceful style of furniture is more suitable for our peaceful times. Eastlake furniture is more rational than much that is modern. . . . However, it is a little bare and cold, has no delicate lines, and does not look like refined work for refined people. . . . The furniture of the Italian renaissance is too costly, and French furniture, gilt and gaudy, is very vulgar, monstrous and unserviceable.<sup>44</sup>

Wharton and Codman may well be responding directly to Wilde’s dismissal of French furniture as “gaudy,” “vulgar,” “monstrous,” and “unserviceable” in their chapter on “The Drawing-room, Boudoir, and Morning-Room.” In fact they seem to speak of Wilde when they cite “the Anglo-Saxon mind” that undermines this tradition:

The term “French furniture” suggests to the Anglo-Saxon mind the stiff appointments of the gala room—heavy gilt consoles, straight-backed arm-chairs covered with tapestry, and monumental marble-topped tables. . . . Among those who have not studied the subject there is a general impression that eighteenth-century furniture . . . was not comfortable in the modern sense. This is owing to the fact that the popular idea of “old furniture” is based on the appointments of gala rooms in palaces. . . . [T]he inspection of any collection of French eighteenth-century furniture . . . will show the versatility and common sense of the old French cabinet-makers. They produced an infinite variety of small *meubles*, in which beauty of design and workmanship were joined to simplicity and convenience. (127–28)

Wharton and Codman, in arguing for the “versatility,” “common sense,” “simplicity,” and “convenience” of eighteenth-century French furniture, may have Wilde in mind when they speak of “those who have not studied the subject.” In discussing furniture, Wharton and Codman use language that echoes Wilde:

In the furnishing of each room the same rule should be as carefully observed. The simplest and most cheaply furnished room (provided the furniture be good of its kind, and the walls and carpet unobjectionable in color) will be

more pleasing to the fastidious eye than one in which gilded consoles and cabinets of buhl stand side by side with cheap machine-made furniture, and delicate old marquetry tables are covered with trashy china ornaments. (24)

Wilde before them had been quick to point out the cheap, the trashy, and the overly ornamental. Wharton and Codman use strong language on the sad state of furniture in American homes. They articulate their regret that in the United States and England, it is exceedingly difficult to buy “plain but well-designed and substantial furniture.” Indeed, they argue,

[n]othing can exceed the ugliness of the current designs: . . . the “bedroom suites” of “mahoganzed” cherry, bird’s-eye maple, or some other crude-colored wood; the tables with meaninglessly turned legs; the “Empire” chairs and consoles stuck over with ornaments of cast bronze washed in liquid gilding; and, worst of all, the supposed “Colonial” furniture, that unworthy travesty of a plain and dignified style. All this showy stuff has been produced in answer to the increasing demand for cheap “effects” in place of unobtrusive merit in material and design; but now that an appreciation of better things in architecture is becoming more general, it is to be hoped that the “artistic” furniture disfiguring so many of our shop-windows will no longer find a market. (26)

The tone suggested by the excessive use of scare quotes in that passage (bedroom suites, mahoganzed, Empire, Colonial, effects, and artistic), along with the claim that “[n]othing can exceed the ugliness of the current designs,” suggests an unrecognized aesthetic kinship uniting Wilde, Wharton, and Codman.

Wilde, who is arguably closer to our contemporary notion of celebrity than any other nineteenth-century literary figure, was as embraced by Americans as he was derided. As Eleanor Fitzsimons notes:

The popular press may have sneered at what it interpreted as his affectation but . . . influential publications like *The Art Interchange* hailed him as “a figure head . . . [of] a great movement.” During the latter part of the nineteenth century, America was gripped by a mania for aesthetic culture, so Wilde’s timing, coupled with the intense publicity surrounding his tour, ensured that, as Michèle Mendelssohn puts it, he “became a convenient and controversial symbol of what aesthetic culture entailed.”<sup>45</sup>

In fact, Wilde may have served as a surprising catalyst and enabler for the likes of Wharton, a woman whose expected vocation, as a member of the leisure class, would have been to ensnare a husband, and certainly *not* to launch a literary career:

Exposure to Wilde’s transformative ideas gave women who were eager to pursue an artistic career but torn, as Blanchard puts it, “between the poles of beauty

and duty,” permission to make art and beauty their life goal. Enterprising, artistic women approved of Wilde’s endorsement of this brand of aestheticism.<sup>46</sup>

Further, “[a]s Vincent O’Sullivan confirms in *Aspects of Wilde*. . . it was not the men, who mostly did not like him [Wilde], who made his success, but the women. He was too far from the familiar type of the men. He did not shoot or hunt or play cards; he had wit, and took the trouble to talk and be entertaining.” As Fitzsimons adds:

Wilde legitimised an appreciation of beauty and a transgression of rigid gender codes. . . . While men sometimes found this softer masculinity threatening, women understood that it dismantled the boundaries that kept them in their place and invited them to occupy the same artistic space as men.<sup>47</sup>

Wilde in fact praised the women of the United States for their trailblazing efforts in the fields of art and letters:

The remarkable intellectual progress of that country [America] is very largely due to the efforts of American women, who edit many of the most powerful magazines and newspapers, take part in the discussion of every question of public interest, and exercise an important influence upon the growth and tendencies of literature and art.<sup>48</sup>

Wilde specifically praised women’s influence on the decorative arts in “The House Beautiful”:

It has been from the desire of women to beautify their households that decorative art has always received its impulse and encouragement. Women have natural art instincts, which men usually acquire only after long special training and study, and it may be the mission of the women of this country to revive decorative art into honest, healthy life.<sup>49</sup>

Notwithstanding the old-fashioned gender assumptions implicit in Wilde’s remarks—i.e., that women, naturally and instinctually, possess a fundamental decorating sense, and that women’s “mission” might direct the nation toward a more “honest” path—American women clearly seemed to love him back. As Fitzsimons notes, “Oscar was popular with American women and his lectures often attracted a predominantly female audience.”<sup>50</sup> Given Wharton’s many close friendships with artistic and intellectual figures who led private or public lives as gay men—Codman among them—it is likely that Wharton would very much have relished Wilde’s irreverent wit and delightful conversation and appreciated the ways in which he arguably complicated the gender roles associated with home design.

The affinities between the Wilde lecture and Wharton and Codman’s *The Decoration of Houses* are abundantly clear in their emphasis on harmony in the home. Wilde in “The House Beautiful” declares:

As regards *rooms generally*: in America the great fault in decoration is the entire *want of harmony* or a definite scheme in color; there is generally a collection of a great many things individually pretty but which do not combine to make a *harmonious whole*.<sup>51</sup>

With Wilde's encomium to "harmony" we hear the influence of his then-friend Whistler, the American expatriate known for his paintings called "Harmonies" and "Symphonies." But perhaps more importantly, Wilde's remark also anticipates Wharton and Codman's statements in their penultimate chapter titled "Bric-à-Brac." It would be just fifteen years later that *The Decoration of Houses* would declare, in very similar language: "a room should depend for its adornment on *general harmony* of parts, and on the artistic quality of such necessities as lamps, screens, bindings, and furniture" (195, emphasis added).

Both treatises have much to say on the proper décor for the walls of those rooms. On picture-hanging, Wilde notes, with his trademark gallows humor, that

*Nothing is more saddening . . . than having to look upon pictures hung in lines; you might as well set . . . twenty young girls on a platform playing one tune on pianos at the same time. Two pictures should not be hung side by side—they will either kill one another, or else commit artistic suicide; . . . the habit in America of hanging [pictures] . . . up near the cornices struck me as irrational . . . ; it was not until I saw how bad the pictures were that I realized the advantage of the custom.*<sup>52</sup>

Particularly striking is the similar language Wharton and Codman use in speaking of the folly of hanging pictures against a patterned background:

*Nothing is more distressing than the sight of a large oil-painting in a ponderous frame seemingly suspended from a spray of wild roses or any of the other naturalistic vegetation of the modern wall-paper. The overlaying of pattern is always a mistake.* (45, emphasis added)

*The Decoration of Houses* admonishes:

pictures on a wall, whether set in panels or merely framed and hung, inevitably become a part of the wall-decoration. . . . Where the walls of a hall are hung with pictures, these should be few in number, and decorative in composition and coloring. (119)

On the quality of the pictures, Wharton and Codman suggest a familiarity with Wilde. Wilde describes the pictures hung in U.S. homes as "dull, commonplace, and tawdry." "Poor pictures," he notes, "are worse than none. If there are good pictures in the house, make the decoration subordinate; if you have not good pictures confine yourself entirely to decorative art

for wall ornaments.”<sup>53</sup> In *The Decoration of Houses*, Wharton and Codman echo Wilde:

The daily intercourse with poor pictures, trashy “ornaments,” and badly designed furniture may, indeed, be fittingly compared with a mental diet of silly and ungrammatical story-books. (175)

Wilde’s remarks on ornament also anticipate *The Decoration of Houses*. He argued in his lecture “The Value of Art in Modern Life” (1884) that “ornament consisted not of superfluities, but of their purgation.”<sup>54</sup> When Wharton and Codman speak of ornamental bric-à-brac, they channel Wilde’s insistence on eliminating the irredeemably gaudy and trashy:

It is one of the misfortunes of the present time that the most preposterously bad things often possess the powerful allurements of being expensive. . . . [I]t is their very unattainableness which, by making them more desirable, leads to the production of that worst curse of modern civilization—cheap copies of costly horrors. (186)

Though the phrases “most preposterously bad things” and “cheap copies of costly horrors” sound very Wildean, they are in fact penned by Wharton and Codman.

A further similarity in this regard is that both treatises reserve considerable space to the quandary of how to reduce a piano’s ugliness. Here Wilde’s deadpan humor is on full display:

One must have a piano I suppose, but it is a melancholy thing, and more like a dreadful, funereal packing case in form than anything else. . . . The revolving stool should be sent to the museum of horrors.<sup>55</sup>

Wharton and Codman express similar dismay at the “clumsy lines of grand and upright pianos” that “disfigure” the “modern music-room” and offer suggestions for re-modeling the grand piano without compromising its function (143).

Another point of overlap between “The House Beautiful” and the aesthetics informing Wharton’s fiction concerns the most advantageous way to display flowers. In fact it is possible that Wilde’s ideas on flower arrangements may have influenced Wharton. Here is Wilde:

flowers which are perfect in form, like the narcissus, daffodil, or lily, should be placed singly in a small Venetian glass so that they can hang naturally as they are seen upon their stem.<sup>56</sup>

Had she resided in the U.S. in the 1880s, the cosmopolitan Ellen Olenska of Wharton’s novel *The Age of Innocence*, whose sitting-room is littered with

works by French writers admired by Wilde—Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, J. K. Huysmans, and Paul Bourget—likely would have appreciated Wilde’s lecture, given her own unconventional habit of placing a single Jacquemost rose on its own in a vase.

While both design treatises concur with the wrongness of wallpapering one’s ceiling—however difficult it may be for modern-day readers to imagine the legitimacy of such a practice<sup>57</sup>—they do not see eye to eye on the proper treatment of walls. First, it is helpful to reference Clarence Cook, with whom Wilde aligns himself, on the subject of wallpaper. In *What Shall We Do With Our Walls?* (1880) Cook recognized the “practical advantages” of wallpaper but also felt that most contemporary wallpapers were marked by bad taste and “monotony” of design. Wilde concedes that contemporary wallpaper was so horrid that a boy might, under its influence, be driven to a life of crime.<sup>58</sup> He prefers wainscoting, which he argues “makes the house warm, . . . is easily done by any carpenter, and . . . will admit of fine work in panel painting, which is a style of decoration most desirable, and one that is growing greatly in favor.”<sup>59</sup> Here Wilde again emphasizes the labor and class issues tied to these aesthetic choices. Still, he acknowledges that because the walls in American homes could “not often . . . be hung with tapestry,” “they should be papered.” Wilde recommends “a joyous paper . . . full of flowers and pleasing designs.”<sup>60</sup>

Wharton and Codman feel strongly that wallpaper diminishes the architectural integrity of a room. We might turn, for example, to an image from Wharton’s youth—the living room of the Jones family home on West 25th Street, which typifies the busy and ornate Victorian style against which the authors were working (Figure 1). Wallpaper, the authors argue, also offends because it amounts to the merely superficial and the ornamental:

It was well for the future of house-decoration when medical science declared itself against the use of wall-papers. . . . Besides being objectionable on sanitary grounds, [wallpapers] . . . are inferior as a wall-decoration to any form of treatment . . . that maintains . . . the architectural lines of a room. . . . Its merits are that it is cheap, easy to put on and easy to remove. On the other hand, it is readily damaged, soon fades, and cannot be cleaned. . . . [A] papered room can never, decoratively or otherwise, be as satisfactory as one in which the walls are treated in some other manner. (44)

The fact that the medical community had by the late 1890s condemned wall paper for its toxic and unsanitary properties lends a whole new reading to the demise of the female narrator of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s story “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892). Gilman’s heroine, sentenced by her doctor husband to take a “rest cure” in a musty rented room of an “ancestral man-





Figure 1. Living room of the Jones house (Edith Wharton's parents) on West 25th Street, New York. (Edith Wharton Collection. Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.)

sion," the walls of which are papered with "sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin," slowly descends into madness.<sup>61</sup> Wharton and Codman would have appreciated the deleterious effects of the unclean wall paper as much as its cringe-inducing "artistic sins."

Readers familiar with *The Decoration of Houses* know that privacy is revered, as it is in Wharton's fiction and her life, as "one of the first requisites of civilized life" (22). "Doors," Wharton and Codman advise, "should always be kept shut" (61). The authors decry "the indifference to privacy which has sprung up in modern times" and is manifest in open floor plans and staircases. Citing a particular modern example, they bemoan the fate that had befallen privacy, manifest in the interior door:

First, the door was slid into the wall; then even its concealed presence was resented, and it was unhung and replaced by a portière; while of late it has actually ceased to form a part of house-building, and many recently built houses contain doorways *without doors*. (48, emphasis in original)

The reader can anticipate the gasp accompanying the final two words of that sentence. "[W]hile the main purpose of a door is to admit," they caution, "its secondary purpose is to exclude" (103). One can imagine the horror Wharton and Codman would have felt upon entering Wilde's own home

in the Chelsea section of London: “All the doors, except the folding doors dividing the drawing-room, were removed, to be replaced by hangings,” which would serve as door curtains.<sup>62</sup>

Both “The House Beautiful” and *The Decoration of Houses* acknowledge the unfortunate nineteenth-century habit of relying on the upholsterer as a stand-in decorator. Wilde notes that a home’s individual style “in most cases . . . has been left to the upholsterers, with the consequence of a general sameness about many dwellings.”<sup>63</sup> Wharton, reflecting in *A Backward Glance* on the book that launched her career, uses strikingly similar language:

the architects of [the late-nineteenth century] looked down on house-decoration . . . and left the field to the upholsterers, who crammed every room with curtains, lambrequins, jardinières of artificial plants, wobbly velvet-covered tables littered with silver gew-gaws, and festoons of lace on mantelpieces and dressing-tables.<sup>64</sup>

Given that Wilde, Wharton, and Codman were all bibliophiles, it should come as no surprise that both design treatises devote space to discussing books as works of art. Here is what Wilde says on the matter in “The House Beautiful”:

Modern book-binding is one of the greatest drawbacks to the beauty of many libraries—books are bound in all manner of gaudy colors. The best binding is white vellum, which in a few years looks like ivory, or calf, and with age takes on the tints of gold. You can’t have all your books rebound. The only thing left is to have curtains to hide them out of sight until a more tasteful style than the modern one of binding prevails.<sup>65</sup>

Wilde in this context essentially conceives of books as decorative objects. In their chapter titled “The Library, Smoking-room, and ‘Den,’” Wharton and Codman offer the following on the subject of book-binding:

since a taste for good bindings has come to be regarded as a collector’s fad, . . . it seems needful to point out how obvious and valuable a means of decoration is lost by disregarding the outward appearance of books. . . . Ordinary bindings of half morocco or vellum form an expanse of warm lustrous color; such bindings are comparatively inexpensive. (147)

Both design treatises, then, seem to concur on the fitfulness of vellum for book bindings. Further, Wharton and Codman suggest that the “more tasteful style” of book binding for which Wilde had longed in the early 1880s had come about by the time their book launched:

The last few years have brought about some improvement; and it is now not unusual for a publisher, in bringing out a book at the ordinary rates, to produce also a small edition in large-paper copies. These large-paper books, though as

yet far from perfect in type and make-up, are superior to the average “commercial article”; and, apart from their artistic merit, are in themselves a good investment, since the value of such editions increases steadily year by year. (148)

Indeed, the opening chapters of Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, which describe Lily Bart’s interactions with the eligible bachelors Lawrence Selden and Percy Gryce, speak to the ways in which a gentleman’s class status is discernible by the quality of his book bindings.

Wilde’s “House Beautiful” lecture and Wharton and Codman’s *The Decoration of Houses* are in many ways kindred literary texts. Given that Oscar Wilde has been accused, admittedly unfairly, of never having had an original thought in his life,<sup>66</sup> it is a poignant irony that his North American lectures on house decoration, perilously coquettish though they might have been, may well have served as an uncredited source for Wharton and Codman’s *The Decoration of Houses*—a scholarly treatise that has rightly been lauded for legitimizing interior design as a profession in the U.S. Wharton and Codman refrain from referencing Oscar Wilde in the six-page bibliography published at the front of their 1897 book. One very practical reason for doing so is the fact that from 1895 onwards, Wilde’s name was associated with infamy due to his highly publicized involvement in the trial of the century.<sup>67</sup> Still, the closest Wharton and Codman come to a wink and a nod to the Apostle of Aestheticism is in their reference, in the chapter on bric-à-brac, to “the disciples of Ruskin and Morris” (of which Wilde was the most famous example) who are attracted to second-generation “pre-Raphaelite pictures” (as Wilde was known to have been).<sup>68</sup> Both design treatises keenly understood the effect domestic spaces have on the individual, as did the fictional and dramatic works published by Wharton and Wilde.<sup>69</sup> Further and more broadly speaking, both treatises respect the influence domestic spaces have on society at large and both cite “incurable ugliness”<sup>70</sup> as public enemy number one, insisting Americans ought to do away with “house[s] full of ugly furniture, badly designed wall-papers and worthless knick-knacks” (175). In fact, that very passage from *The Decoration of Houses* could have just as easily been uttered by the Apostle of Beauty. “If only I could do over my aunt’s drawing-room,” Lily Bart would memorably lament while contemplating her adoptive home, “I know I should be a better woman.”<sup>71</sup> Wilde, who felt “living up to” his beloved “blue china” might make him a better man, would similarly be attuned to the walls encircling him. In fact, when we juxtapose the wallpaper from the home of Edith Wharton’s mother with that of the hotel room where Wilde took his last breath in November 1900, we might better appreciate his famous last words (Figure 2). “My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death,”

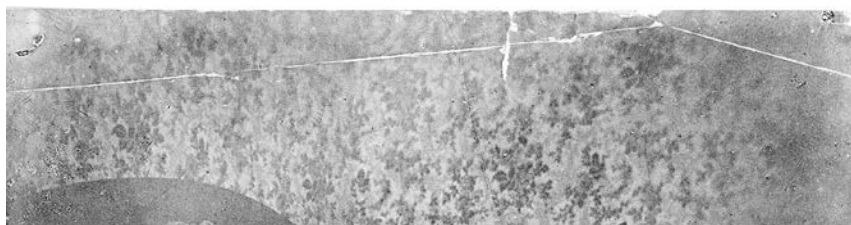


Figure 2. Post-mortem of Wilde in the Hotel d'Alsace room where he died (photograph by Maurice Gilbert). (The William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles.)

Wilde is alleged to have said from his deathbed in Paris. “One or the other of us has to go.”<sup>72</sup> The wallpaper, of course, won, and the comment surely made its way across the Atlantic to Wharton and Codman who, by 1900, had Wilde well represented in their sensibly decorated libraries.

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### Notes

1. Annette Benert, *The Architectural Imagination of Edith Wharton: Gender, Class, and Power in the Progressive Era* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 2007), p. 25. For their invaluable assistance with the Codman family papers, I would like to thank Lorna Condon and Abigail Cramer of the Historic New England Archive. Hearty thanks also to David Doyle, Pauline Metcalf, Richard Guy Wilson, and Nels Pearson. I owe a great debt of gratitude to the English Department, the Humanities Institute of the College of Arts and Sciences, and the Faculty Research Committee at Fairfield University. I also thank my colleagues in the Edith Wharton Society. The essay is dedicated to Frank and Anita Orlando, the most important Boston architect and domestic artist in my life.

2. Marie Kondo's globally sensational book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2014) echoes in surprising ways Wharton and Codman's mantra to surround oneself with things that radiate beauty and joy while eliminating clutter.

3. Wilde was concurrently being spoofed in Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta *Patience* (Eleanor Fitzsimons, *Wilde's Women: How Oscar Wilde Was Shaped by the Women He Knew* [New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2016], p. 100). And yet, just as Wilde would declare in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that “the only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about,” the publicity afforded from *Patience* arguably worked in his favor. His mother, Lady Jane Wilde, would observe that the operetta “actually gained proselytes to the aesthetic movement” (qtd. in Fitzsimons, *Wilde's Women*, p. 101). Wilde presented lectures titled “The English Renaissance of Art,” “The Decorative Arts” and “The House Beautiful” (Mendelssohn, *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2007], p. 213). More than one source notes that Wilde was compelled to go on tour to pay his bills. His efforts paid off: “Wilde made a substantial sum of money from his tour, and on his return to London he undertook many other engagements all over England and as far as Glasgow. Yeats heard him lecture in Dublin and was transfixed by his fluency and wit, but he had a number of near escapes from dissatisfied members of his audiences who demanded their money back” (Charlotte Gere with Lesley Hoskins, *The House Beautiful: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetic Interior* [London: Lund Humphries, 2000], p. 95).

4. Mendelssohn, pp. 214–15.
5. Wilde's full lecture was first published with a detailed introduction by Kevin H. F. O'Brien, "The House Beautiful": A Reconstruction of Oscar Wilde's American Lecture," *Victorian Studies*, 17 (June 1974), 395–418.
6. Mendelssohn, p. 213.
7. Mendelssohn, p. 233n9.
8. Pater, "Romanticism" (1876), *Macmillan's*, 35 (November 1876), 64; rev. and rep. as 'Postscript' (1889) in *Appreciations with An Essay on Style* (London: Macmillan, 1910), p. 241.
9. Waithe, "William Morris and the House Beautiful," in *Oscar Wilde in Context*, ed. Kerry Powell and Peter Raby (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013), p. 88.
10. Gere with Hoskins, p. 92.
11. Wilde in a terse letter to Archibald Forbes dated 20 April 1882 (*The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 129). In a 15 February 1882 letter to George Curzon, Wilde wrote: "I lecture four times a week, and the people are delightful and lionize one to a curious extent, but they follow me, and start schools of design when I visit their town. At Philadelphia the school is called after me and they really are beginning to love and know beautiful art and its meaning" (p. 139).
12. As Donna Campbell has noted, if Wilde and Wharton met, neither writer seems to have recorded the meeting. (<https://donnamcampbell.wordpress.com/2015/02/27/did-edith-wharton-meet-oscar-wilde-during-his-1882-american-tour-a-continuing-literary-mystery/>) Accessed 22 April 2015. There is no reference to Wilde in Wharton's published letters.
13. *Oscar Wilde in America: The Interviews*, ed. Matthew Hofer and Gary Scharnhorst (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2013), p. 22.
14. Further, given Codman's not at all closeted attraction to younger men as documented in letters to his friend and fellow architect Arthur Little (1852–1925) and the number of times he crossed the Atlantic, it is not impossible that Codman interacted with Wilde or at least members of his circle. See especially David D. Doyle, Jr., "A Very Proper Bostonian": Rediscovering Ogden Codman and His Late-Nineteenth-Century Queer World," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 13 (October 2004), 446–76. Doyle focuses on Codman's letters to Little, "in which he discusses his same-sex desires and his self-perceptions with someone who understood and embraced such attractions" (448). Doyle aptly notes that "men like Codman, who presented mainstream gender behavior, were not on a quest for an ideal friend. Rather, they were sexual predators who sought out young men who could be controlled and dominated. This pattern continued throughout Codman's life, even during the years of his marriage (which also signified him as in the mainstream). He pursued attractive young men, normally in their late teens and early twenties, from his late twenties right up until his death in 1951" (451). Wilde "sailed out of New York . . . on 27 December 1882" which means it would have been possible for him to have crossed paths with Codman or Wharton while in the United States. Wilde returned to the states "eight months later to oversee the Broadway debut of *Vera*" (Fitzsimons, *Wilde's Women*, p. 114).
15. Mrs. Paran Stevens (1827–95), formerly Marietta Reed, is the inspiration behind Wharton's Mrs. Lemuel Struthers, the opportunistic society hostess and widow to a shoe-polish manufacturer in *The Age of Innocence*. Fitzsimons notes that upon his arrival in New York, "Wilde visited the magnificent Fifth Avenue home of widowed philanthropist, art collector and society patron Marietta Paran Stevens. . . . [S]he was described by the *New York Times* as an 'impulsive woman, never hesitating to give full expression of her opinions about everybody and everything uppermost in her mind.' Her lavish entertainments were legendary and her authority was indisputable: 'No woman in New York society was better known than Mrs. Paran Stevens,' the obituarist in the *New York Times* declared, adding 'she was equally well known in Paris, London, Berlin and Vienna.' Paying homage to

her patronage, he continued: ‘probably no woman in New York has launched a greater number of ambitious young men and women into the social maelstrom.’ Mrs. Stevens entertained Wilde twice in New York. Fitzsimons cites these dates as the eve of his first lecture in New York (thus early January) and January 16, the eve of his departure from New York (Fitzsimons, “‘The Paradise for Women’: How Oscar Wilde was Embraced by the Women of America,” *Comparative American Studies*, 14, 1 [2016], 54). Given Codman’s tendency to keep company with influential society hostesses, it seems highly likely that he would have interacted with the formidable Mrs. Stevens in Newport and/or New York.

16. Hermione Lee, *Edith Wharton* (New York: Vintage, 2007), p. 60.

17. “From the moment he arrived, American women invited Wilde into their homes and attended his lectures, lending him credibility and ensuring that his activities were publicised. One typical report in the *New York Times* described how, at a reception held for him just days after his arrival, ‘the ladies clustered about him, and seemed greatly interested in what he had to say.’ Key among Wilde’s attractions were: his association with the Aesthetic Movement; his self-proclaimed status as an arbiter of what was fashionable in Europe; his considerable personal charm; and, in some instances, his relationship to his mother, a revolutionary poet lauded by Irish Americans who had arrived during the Great Famine of the 1840s” (Fitzsimons, “Paradise,” p. 50).

18. Wilde arrived in Newport on 13 July 1882, dined with Julia Ward Howe the next day, and spent the night in her home. He lectured at the Casino Theater in Newport on 15 July 1882 (*Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 129). The Newport Historical Society reports that “Henry Marion Hall, Howe’s grandson, recalls Wilde’s visit to Howe’s farm in Portsmouth [Rhode Island] in his memoir *Grandmother’s Blue Coach*: ‘The party included Tom Appleton, the famous Boston wit, Adamowski, leader of the Boston Symphony orchestra, Mrs. Paran Stevens, Lilla Elliott, Grandmother’s nephew F. Marion Crawford, and Oscar Wilde, then at the peak of his popularity” ([www.newporthistory.org/2010/found-oscar-wilde-in-newport](http://www.newporthistory.org/2010/found-oscar-wilde-in-newport)). Shari Benstock notes that Wharton, her brother Harry, and their newly-widowed mother Lucretia “returned to Newport” in early summer 1882 (Benstock, *No Gifts from Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton* [New York: Scribner’s, 1994], p. 43). Theresa Craig observes that after the March 1882 death of Wharton’s beloved father, Edith and her mother returned to Pencraig in Newport (Craig, *Edith Wharton: A Room Full of Rooms, Architecture, Interiors, and Gardens* [New York: Monacelli Press, 1996], p. 20). Wharton could not have been unaware of Wilde’s appearance in Newport.

19. Lee, p. 61.

20. While Pauline Metcalf had suggested Ogden Codman, Jr., returned to the U.S. in 1883, one year after a tiresome apprenticeship with a German banking firm (Metcalf, *Ogden Codman and the Decoration of Houses* [Boston: Godine, 1988], p. 5), unpublished letters in the Codman family papers at the Historic New England Archive and the Ogden Codman, Jr., papers at the Boston Athenaeum confirm that he was back living in Brookline, Massachusetts, by late 1882, when Wilde was still touring North America. This after months of pleas from Hamburg to his mother at Dinard to return to the U.S.: “I haven’t got over wanting to go to America. . . . I don’t see why I should not do very well” (16 February 1882, HNEA, folder 1145). And “The more I think about going home the more I like the idea” (7–10 March 1882 to Sarah Codman, HNEA, folder 1145). Additional yearnings for home appear in letters dated 14 and 17 March 1882. A letter dated 5 December 1935 to his cousin Fanny reflects back to “the winter that I spent with you in Brookline, 1882–1883” (Boston Athenaeum, Ogden Codman, Jr., Personal Letters).

21. “More than a decade after Wilde’s first lectures on the subject [i.e., in the early 1890s], the connection between Wilde and interior decoration showed little sign of deteriorating. An 1894 article on ‘Mrs Oscar Wilde at Home’ told readers that ‘like her husband [Constance Wilde] may be truly called an apostle of the beautiful. She has . . . made everything that concerns the beautifying of the home a special study’, while an

1895 article offered guidance on ‘How to Decorate a House’ by ‘Mrs Oscar Wilde’ (Mendelssohn 211).

22. Walter Berry gave Wharton a copy of Wilde’s poems in 1903 (Lee 657). Ramsden’s account of Wharton’s library—which is incomplete due to its destruction during the Blitz—lists Wilde’s poems and *The Importance of Being Earnest* among her books. Further, Wharton would have been one step removed from Wilde’s world by way of her onetime lover Morton Fullerton, who moved on the fringes of Wilde’s social circles (Lee 325). Codman deeply admired Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. He spoke in a letter to Arthur Little of wanting to get ahold of the “poisonous book” to which Wilde alludes in that novel. The title was identified in the 1890 Lippincott’s publication of Wilde’s novel as *Le Secret de Raoul par Catulle Sarrazin* and the letters between Little and Codman make it clear the version they were reading of *Dorian Gray* is the toned-down 1891 edition, which stops short of naming the poisonous yellow book. Wilde’s novel seems to have informed more than one Wharton tale. See, for example, “The Moving Finger” and “The Eyes.”

23. See Barbara L. Kernan’s dissertation *Edith Wharton in the Art and “Act of Making a Habitation for Herself”* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin, 2008). Kernan cites Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter McNeil’s work on women designers (4). See also McNeil’s “Designing Women,” *Art History*, 17 (December 1994), 633.

24. *Essays and Lectures by Oscar Wilde* (London: Methuen, 1908), p. 160.

25. Mendelssohn, p. 202.

26. Yet this would also be a transatlantic iteration of this nation-making. As Margaret Cohen argues, “Transactions between virtue and status were essential to creating this [construct of the] nation, fusing the values of the old ruling class, the aristocracy, with the values of the emergent ruling class, the middle class” (Cohen, *The Novel and the Sea* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2010], p. 152).

27. This wonderful (and arguably Wildean) phrase, which appeared in an early draft of *The Decoration of Houses* stored with the Codman papers at Historic New England Archive, was replaced with the much softer “labyrinth of dubious eclecticism” (Wharton and Codman, *The Decoration of Houses* [New York: Scribner’s, 1897], p. 2). Subsequent citations indicated parenthetically.

28. Qtd. in Metcalf, p. 149. That “bad taste” is prominently displayed in Wharton’s description in *The Custom of the Country* (New York: Scribner’s, 1913), p. 45, of Peter Van Degen’s Fifth Avenue mansion. The residence is a loosely veiled reference to the “Petit Chateau” designed by Richard Morris Hunt in 1883 for W. K. Vanderbilt and his wife Alva on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 52nd Street: “a muddle of misapplied ornament over a thin steel shell was built up in Wall Street, the social trimmings were hastily added in Fifth Avenue; and the union between them was as monstrous and factitious, as unlike the gradual homogeneous growth which flowers into what other countries know as society, as that between the Blois gargoyles on Peter Van Degen’s roof and the skeleton walls supporting them.”

29. *Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 140.

30. Waithe, p. 90.

31. O’Brien, paragraph 3.

32. Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, book I, chapter II, section 17.

33. Qtd. in *A Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. Stephen Davies et al. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2009), p. 128.

34. In 1890 an inquisitive fan named Bernulf Clegg wrote Wilde asking him to expand on this statement. To his surprise, Wilde responded with a letter that explained: “Art is useless because its aim is simply to create a mood. It is not meant to instruct, or to influence action in any way. It is superbly sterile, and the note of its pleasure is sterility. If the contemplation of a work of art is followed by activity of any kind, the work is either of a very second-rate order, or the spectator has failed to realise the complete artistic impression. A work of art is useless as a flower is useless. A flower blossoms for its own joy. We

gain a moment of joy by looking at it. That is all that is to be said about our relations to flowers. Of course man may sell the flower, and so make it useful to him, but this has nothing to do with the flower. It is not part of its essence. It is accidental. It is a misuse. All this is I fear very obscure. But the subject is a long one" (<http://www.lettersofnote.com/2010/01/art-is-useless-because.html> 8/30/16).

35. O'Brien, paragraphs 48–50.

36. Hofer and Scharnhorst, "Introduction" to *Oscar Wilde in America: The Interviews*, p. 8.

37. O'Brien, paragraph 50.

38. O'Brien, paragraph 50.

39. O'Brien, paragraph 50.

40. Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (New York: Scribner's, 1905), p. 142.

41. Much later in his career Codman would privately reveal his disdain for Ruskin in writing to a close correspondent. Discussing Ferguson's *History of Architecture*, Codman unfavorably compares the book with an important predecessor: "So like that nasty *impotent* Ruskin, I am glad his poor wife got away and became Lady Millais" (9 April 1937, Boston Athenaeum, Codman Personal Letters). Surprisingly little has been made in the criticism to date of the fact that Codman, who was not at all closeted about his same-sex romantic conquests, would, in collaborating with Wharton, use language (e.g., "abyss," "moral degradation") that had been used two years earlier in the 1895 trial against Wilde for "acts of gross indecency with a male person."

42. O'Brien, paragraph 23.

43. O'Brien, paragraph 23 (emphasis added).

44. O'Brien, paragraph 22.

45. Fitzsimons, "Paradise," p. 51.

46. Fitzsimons, "Paradise," p. 51.

47. Fitzsimons, "Paradise," pp. 51–52.

48. Quoted in Fitzsimons, *Wilde's Women*, p. 102.

49. O'Brien, p. 402n24.

50. Fitzsimons, *Wilde's Women*, p. 108.

51. O'Brien, paragraph 13, emphasis added.

52. O'Brien, paragraph 35, emphasis added.

53. O'Brien, paragraph 28.

54. Qtd. in Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Knopf, 1988), p. 262.

55. O'Brien, paragraph 30.

56. O'Brien, paragraph 31.

57. Here is Wilde: "Don't paper it; that gives one the sensation of living in a paper box, which is not pleasant. . . . If you cannot use plaster, the ceiling might be panelled in wood, with paintings or stamped leather in the centers. If you cannot have the cross-beams or woodwork, then have it painted in the color which predominates in the room" (O'Brien, paragraph 18). *The Decoration of Houses* agrees: "One would think that the inappropriateness of this treatment was obvious; . . . The necessity for hiding cracks in the plaster is the reason most often given for papering ceilings; but the cost of mending cracks is small and a plaster ceiling lasts much longer than is generally thought. . . . If the cost of repairing must be avoided, a smooth white lining-paper should be chosen in place of one of the showy and vulgar papers which serve only to attract attention" (96).

58. Qtd. in Ellmann, p. 193.

59. O'Brien, paragraph 10.

60. O'Brien, paragraph 17. Like Wharton, Wilde did not always take his own advice. For example, he "was shortly to repudiate . . . firmly" the virtues of wallpaper (Gere with Hoskins, p. 102).

61. Gilman, "The Yellow Wall-Paper," *New England Magazine*, 5 (January 1892), 647–56.

62. Gere and Hoskins, p. 99.



63. O'Brien, paragraph 5, emphasis added.

64. Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: Scribner's, 1964), pp. 106–07.

65. O'Brien, paragraph 38.

66. Hence the oft-quoted exchange with his one-time friend James Whistler: Wilde: "I wish I'd said that, James." Whistler: "Don't worry, Oscar, you will."

67. When given the opportunity to support Wilde at the time of his public demise, Henry James, who would become a close confidant of Wharton's, relinquished the opportunity. James had met Wilde in Washington in 1882 and called him, in a letter to Isabella Stewart Gardner, "repulsive and fatuous": "James denied friendship with Wilde well into the 1890s, when he excused himself from signing a petition for Wilde's release from prison because 'the document would only exist as a manifesto of personal loyalty to Oscar by his friends, of which he was never one'" (*Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 643n1), as Jonathan Sturges told the petition's proposer" (Mendelssohn 29).

68. Wharton and Codman acknowledge that "the passion for collecting antiquities is at least as old as the Roman Empire, and Græco-Roman sculptors had to make archaic statues to please the popular fancy, just as our artists paint pre-Raphaelite pictures to attract the disciples of Ruskin and William Morris" (188).

69. For instance, Wharton would describe George Darrow's impression of his surroundings in *The Reef* (New York: D. Appleton, 1912), p. 74, as follows: "The room was getting on his nerves. . . . [I]t seemed to have taken complete possession of his mind, to be soaking itself into him like an ugly indelible blot. . . . It was extraordinary with what a microscopic minuteness of loathing he hated it all: the grimy carpet and wallpaper, the black marble mantel-piece, the clock with a gilt allegory under a dusty bell, the high-bolstered brown-counterpaned bed, the framed card of printed rules under the electric light switch, and the door of communication with the next room. He hated the door most of all." Wilde would similarly attend to interior décor throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and particularly in the opening scene and in this passage in which the now jaded Dorian returns to his childhood play-room: "He had not entered the place for more than four years—not, indeed, since he had used it first as a play-room when he was a child, and then as a study when he grew somewhat older. It was a large, well-proportioned room, which had been specially built by the last Lord Kelso for the use of the little grandson whom, for his strange likeness to his mother, and also for other reasons, he had always hated and desired to keep at a distance. It appeared to Dorian to have but little changed. There was the huge Italian *casone*, with its fantastically painted panels and its tarnished gilt mouldings, in which he had so often hidden himself as a boy. There the satinwood book-case filled with his dog-eared schoolbooks. On the wall behind it was hanging the same ragged Flemish tapestry where a faded king and queen were playing chess in a garden, while a company of hawkers rode by, carrying hooded birds on their gauntleted wrists. How well he remembered it all! Every moment of his lonely childhood came back to him as he looked round. He recalled the stainless purity of his boyish life, and it seemed horrible to him that it was here the fatal portrait was to be hidden away. How little he had thought, in those dead days, of all that was in store for him!" (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* [London and New York: Ward, Locke, 1891], p. 181)

70. In *A Backward Glance* (91), Wharton had called her Newport home Lands End "incurably ugly" prior to the renovations which Codman oversaw.

71. Wharton, *The House of Mirth*, p. 10.

72. Gere and Hoskins, p. 107.