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Gender Politics and Architectural Space in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*

Edith Wharton was "emphatically not a feminist in the ordinary sense of the word," argued Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in the late 1980s (126). Since then a host of feminist scholars have engaged with the sexual politics of Wharton's work, but she is still occasionally perceived as an "innate conservative" who "never allied herself with the feminist movements of her day" (Goodman 35). In broader terms, critics have tended to either describe her as "comparatively indifferent to questions of both racial and national identity" (Michaels 8) or to dismiss her conservative political views, seeing them "as less a site of deliberate forethought than a consequence of elite inheritance" (Kassanoff 1).[1] Perhaps most scathingly, Alfred Kazin argued in 1941 that "[Wharton] had no conception of America as a unified and dynamic economy, or even as a single culture" (82). The task of categorizing Wharton's politics is further complicated by her contradictory descriptions of herself as a "rabid imperialist" and "hopelessly unpolitical."[2] Whether Wharton's conservative politics are seen as a birthright or as an anachronism owing largely to her elitist past, they merit reevaluation, as they help illuminate the role of interior design and architectural space in her work. By architectural space, I mean the form space receives and the meaning it conveys in a specific socio-cultural and artistic environment.

[1] It would be unfair to Kassanoff's project not to mention her groundbreaking analysis of Wharton's politics of race. See especially chapter 2. See also Robin Peel who identifies an ideological shift in Wharton's thought from inherited conservativism to a form of social determinism (272).

[2] Both self-descriptions come from Wharton's letters to Sara Norton. The first letter, written in 1901, is quoted in Frederick Wegener, "'Rabid Imperialist'" (783). The second is dated 25 January 1910 (Wharton Archives, Beinecke Library, Yale University) in *The Letters of Edith Wharton*.

Acknowledging the political and expressive complexity of Wharton's work,[3] this essay demonstrates the symbiotic relationship between her politics—and specifically her views on gender identity and social class—and her architectural formulations. Following a revival in interest in her work as a whole, scholars have begun to identify the significance of Wharton's writings on architecture and interior design. Situating her architectural interest within the surrounding material culture, this study indicates how Wharton constructed real and fictional space that reflected her gender, class, and national aspirations. It is my contention that her elite aesthetic preferences—and in particular her views on architectural and decorative design—served to maintain and reaffirm her conservative ideology.[4] I examine Wharton's Pulitzer award-winning novel, *The Age of Innocence* (1920), in the context of her work on architectural design and decoration, particularly *The Decoration of Houses* (1897). Thereby, I shall illustrate how Wharton mobilizes architectural spaces and domestic furnishings to challenge traditional divisions of private and public space along gender and class lines, potentially transforming how these are inhabited.[5]

After a brief overview of Wharton's contribution to turn-of-the-century architectural thought and practice, I move on to consider two spatial structures in *The Age of Innocence*, in which key narrative scenes take place: Ellen Olenska's drawing room and the Metropolitan Museum of New York. These two fictional localities, one private and one public, one domestic and sensual, the other institutional and spectacular, are both imbricated within overlapping and interdependent social networks where gender merges with the social and the national. My claim is that Wharton's reflexive awareness of the embeddedness of the public in the private, of the institutional in the quotidian, *resonates* in her narrative spatial constructions and in her choice of fictional architectural and decorative details. Space is inherently embodied, but Wharton's privileged spaces are designed to unhinge habituated

[3] It is beyond the limits of this essay to assess Wharton's politics, especially considering the recent revival of Wharton studies. Suffice to say that I agree with Kassanoff's observation that "[w]e need to evaluate Wharton's work on its own terms, unconstrained by either well-meaning protectionism or patronizing neglect" (4).

[4] Kassanoff rightly questions why American critics assume that "a patrician woman would have no reason to mobilize her conservative ideology with the same deliberate forethought that we have come to expect from writers like Wyndham Lewis, George Santayana or Henry James" (2).

[5] I would like to acknowledge Annette Benert's important book-length study *The Architectural Imagination of Edith Wharton*. It tracks Wharton's architectural and literary work "in tandem." The book traces the tension between "the beauty and grace of elegant houses and public spaces, and their powerful effects on those with little access to them" (7).

experiences and to provoke affective engagement that alters the individual's perception of the private/public binary and the meaning of space more generally. Eventually, too, such spatial experience of the built environment might contribute, in Wharton's view, to women's increased involvement in different levels of social life and the public sphere.

The Decoration of Houses and American Renaissance Architecture in Turn-of-the-Century

> Moderation, fitness, relevance-these are the qualities that give permanence to the work of great architects
> (*The Decoration of Houses* 198)

The Decoration of Houses, Wharton's first full-length study with which she entered the literary marketplace, is considered "one of the first statements of interior design" (Kaplan 77). Published four years after the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition at the peak of the American Renaissance, and written in collaboration with architect Ogden Codman, the book urges women to adopt the role of both consumers and producers of their domestic space.[6] "Tyrannized over by the wants of others," most women, the authors declare, tend "to want things because other people have them, rather than to have things because they are wanted" (*Decoration* 18, 17). This brings to the forefront Wharton's firm belief that architecture is a powerful force in identity formation. It helps shape human experience and is in turn shaped by it; built environment and decoration are an expression of one's self and one's social standing, but they also form and are capable of reforming one's self and social status. Women, Wharton suggests, would be able to confront the duality between the architecture/interior design binary by creating and applying an aesthetic language and gaze of interior decoration that would denote their aesthetic preference and cultivated taste. They ought to produce spaces that allow "men and women to interact on equal grounds" (Chase 137). The book therefore proposes a synthesis of private and public realms, achieved, to slightly paraphrase Kaplan, when "architecture is internalized into domestic space and the private self is externalized onto objects" through formal means (78).

The Decoration of Houses foregrounds the aesthetic qualities of the American Renaissance—the style which in Wharton's view is best suited to

[6] While I concentrate on the female audience of *The Decoration of Houses*, it should be noted that this book is aimed at both men and women, and at both decorators and non-professionals.

serve the nation's manifold aspirations and needs at the dawn of the Progressive Era. Intensely nationalistic and expressing best "the political-cultural ideals" of the nation (R. G. Wilson 75), the American Renaissance was "at once old guard and reformist, aesthetically neo-classical and civically progressive" (Benert, *Architectural Imagination* 25). It objected to the incongruous accumulation of cultural and stylistic elements within the stultified confines of Victorianism and drew inspiration from the aesthetic vision of Classic and Renaissance art. As a result, it favored a neoclassical style adapted to specifically nationalistic ends. For her part, Wharton wished to play a part "in the renaissance of taste in America" (Kinman 117). She adamantly denounced end-of-the-century architecture and decoration in America for being a veritable "labyrinth of dubious eclecticism" (*Decoration* 2). Instead, she favored as "especially suited to modern [American] life" those buildings erected "in Italy after the beginning of the sixteenth century, and in other European countries after the full assimilation of the Italian influence" (2).

In harmony with the building's exterior, its "interior architecture" ought to exhibit, in Wharton's view, proportion, moderation, comfort and convenience in adherence to the classical ideals.[7] The implicit purpose of developing domestic interior design was to empower upper-class women to understand themselves as knowers, creators, and actors rather than mere consumers of material culture, items on display, or ornamental "spectacles of leisure," to borrow from Montgomery's book title.[8] At the same time, to the extent that it could be emulated, such performance was supposed to have an increasing influence on the negotiations over privileges of class and gender at the end of the nineteenth century. In her autobiography, Wharton noted, "One of my most depressing impressions of my childhood is my recollection of the intolerable ugliness of New York, of its untended streets and the narrow houses so lacking in external dignity, so crammed with smug and suffocating upholstery" (*Backward Glance* 54). Architecture was the one area which would enable her to combat the oppressive presence of the ugly. Her engagement with the built environment allowed her to become involved in the complex process of negotiating social and sexual attitudes and ideals without betraying her class politics.

[7] My argument differs from Benert's only in her reading of *The Age of Innocence*: in her *Architectural Imagination* where she sees Wharton's loss of faith in architecture, her vision replaced with nostalgia, I contend that Wharton consistently privileged the American Renaissance style because of the vital role it played in female identity formation.

[8] Similarly, Chase contends that "*The Decoration of Houses* provides a theoretical program for equality in gender interaction and space" (156).

Beyond the Gendered Division of Space

... for I was always vaguely frightened by ugliness
(Backward Glance 44*)*

The Age of Innocence was Edith Wharton's first published novel after the end of the First World War. In many ways, it is her narrative response to cataclysmic social and geopolitical change. Her imagination recoiled to a place and time of her youth, to provide both a nostalgic depiction of old New York and an ironic assessment of the fierce and fundamental changes she herself and the world around her had undergone. Indeed, her experience of the Great War had a profound effect on her state of mind. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton recalls:

> Death and mourning darkened the houses of all my friends and I mourned with them, and mingled my private grief with the general sorrow. […]. (364)
>
> My spirit was heavy with these losses but I could not sit still and brood over them. I wanted to put them into words […]. (369)

Although neither its subject matter nor setting seem adequate to account for the irreparable damage inflicted by the war, *The Age of Innocence* reflects Wharton's yearning to retrieve traces of the past, "to warm her hands thankfully at the old fire, though every year it is fed with the dry wood of more old memories" (*Backward Glance* 379). Expressive of her aching search for continuity and stability, her architectural imagination penetrates into the same "carefully guarded interiors," the same well-furnished drawing rooms she depicted in *The Decoration of Houses*, trying to recreate the experiential dimension of inhabiting built space. It is small wonder that contemporary criticism commented on her art of writing as inseparable from her skillful decoration.[9]

However, Wharton is not simply a "poet of the interior," as Edmund Wilson dubbed her, nor does she merely correlate "her characters' social standing and behavior onto the built environment they inhabit" (Falk 23), as a number of critics have noted.[10] Rather, *The Age of Innocence* involves powerful, intellectually adventurous female characters with an artistic eye, who break firmly ingrained architectural rules, dominate their physical environment, and experience architectural space affectively as "lived space,"

[9] Wharton's contemporary critical reception is described in Lyn Bennett's "Presence and Professionalism."

[10] "Justice to Edith Wharton." See also Stephenson, "Decorating Fiction"; Jones, "Edith Wharton's "Secret Sensitiveness"; Kinman, "The Making of a Professional."

to use Henri Lefebvre's expression. Some of these triumphs are easily overlooked, as they appear trivial from a twenty-first century perspective. For our purposes, however, they are significant.

Countess Ellen Olenska, the character with whom Wharton most closely identified, is a case in point. At first glance, Ellen Olenska is anything but emancipated. She represses her desire to divorce her husband and live with Newland Archer and instead submits to social convention, a decision born not from "blind conformity to tradition" (*Age of Innocence* 201)[11] but personal morals.[12] My contention, however, is that Ellen derives a kind of power from her use of architectural space. In particular, Ellen's construction of her surroundings contrasts sharply with the claustrophobic Victorian domestic spaces Wharton describes in *The Decoration of Houses.* By skillfully deconstructing domestic space through an obliteration of the distinction between domestic objects and objects of art, and encouraging interaction between design and use of space, both Wharton and her heroine are able to create new possibilities for experiencing built space. Thus, Ellen's drawing room functions as a potent public medium for women to exchange ideas with artists, male and female friends without departing from the "woman's sphere." The unconventional design of Olenska's dwelling is a physical counterpart to the unconventional figurative space she gives her guests to express themselves and behave, free from social constraints.

Upon entering her drawing room, Newland Archer is struck by "the faded shadowy charm of a room unlike any room he had known" (61).

> [It had] small slender tables of dark wood, a delicate little Greek bronze on the chimney-piece, and a stretch of red damask nailed on the discolored wallpaper behind a couple of Italian-looking pictures in old frames. [...] [T]hese pictures bewildered him, for they were like nothing that he was accustomed to look at (and therefore able to see) [...]. The atmosphere of the room was so different from any he had ever breathed that self-consciousness vanished in the sense of adventure. […] [W]hat struck him was the way in which [the] shabby hired house [...] had, by a turn of the hand, and the skilful [sic] use of a few properties, been transformed into something intimate, "foreign," subtly suggestive of old romantic scenes and sentiments. (61–62)

Ellen Olenska's exotic sitting room intensifies Newland Archer's fascination with and desire for Ellen. He marvels at her ability to combine diverse

[11] Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

[12] Hermione Lee concludes that the novel's unhappy ending shows "there is no escape" (580). Ammons suggests that the ending proves a "failing" of the heroine and of America (127). Elaman-Garner reads Ellen's choice to leave Newland and go to Paris as an instance of "the disruption of hegemonic discourses and a recognition of female voice, agency and struggle" (n. pag.).

objects, belonging to different cultures and temporalities, and to appropriate their foreignness. Her choice of furniture and art objects intertwined with interior lighting, soft materials, and pervading perfumes, stimulates his senses and elicits in him a sense of disinhibition toward both setting and its inhabitant. He is attracted to this space in which there seem to be no limits on self-expression and freedom, no gender restrictions in social interaction. He in turn resents that the space appeals to other guests aside from him, both male and female. In this way, Wharton imagines Ellen's drawing room as capable of symbolically exerting upon the experiencing subjects the principles of its own construction and as defying traditionally gendered divisions of space. Her creative agency morphs the plain, unremarkable, shabby house into an affective, sensual dwelling.

Equally significant is the fact that Countess Olenska dares to distance herself from the traditional section of New York by choosing to reside in the "almost unmapped" quarter of the city, "far down West Twenty-third Street" (103, 66), a "queer" (104) neighborhood inhabited "by artists, musicians and 'people who wrote'" (87). Taking into consideration that the East Side is where the fashionable young people like Newland and May Archer live, Olenska's residential preference of the "Bohemian" district of New York was deemed too "unpleasant to visit" (88) by the *haute bourgeoisie*. Her identity does not draw on the status and respectability of the location of her dwelling nor is it founded on signifiers of class or rank but on taste. When, for example, Archer remarks that living in the "Bohemian" district is "not fashionable," she replies: "Fashionable! Do you all think so much of that? Why not make one's own fashions?" (65). Olenska's tastes in interior design and neighborhoods thus reflect broader notions of independence and nonconformity.

Wharton makes clear that Olenska has inherited this rebelliousness from her grandmother, Catherine Mingott, who "mingled freely in foreign society" (15) following the death of her wealthy husband and, upon her return to the United States, shocked the elite members of Old New York with her architectural tastes. Catherine the Great, as relatives term her, was "always indifferent to precedent"—she constructed her dwelling "in an inaccessible wilderness near the Central Park" (15). Nobody ever *had* built above Fortieth Street" until she did, she tells Archer (129, emphasis in original) and "put the crowning touch to her audacities" by building a "large house of pale cream-coloured stone (when brown sandstone seemed as much the only wear as a frock coat in the afternoon)," which was "modelled on the private hotels of the Parisian aristocracy" (14–15).

Catherine's defiance of architectural tradition extends to her interior space: She combines "pre-Revolutionary furniture" with "souvenirs of the Tuileries of Louis Napoleon" (15). She "bodily cast out the massive furniture

of her prime, and mingled with the Mingott heirlooms the frivolous upholstery of the [French] Second Empire" (26). In her middle years, she flaunts every architectural propriety and "with characteristic independence" she remodels the interior of her house, transforming the ground floor into a sitting room followed by a bedroom, so as to accommodate "the burden of [her] flesh" (27). Naturally, "[h]er visitors were startled by the foreignness of this arrangement," and, as in the case of Olenska's drawing room, Mingott's *mise-en-scene* recalls episodes "in French fiction, and architectural incentives to immorality such as the simple American had never dreamed of" (27). Clearly, Mrs. Mingott embodies Wharton's convictions as elaborated in *The Decoration of Houses* that a house was to represent the inhabitant's personality. Her eccentric architectural and decorating choices reveal her to be an independent woman who refuses to "blind[ly] confor[m] to tradition" (240). The respect she earns from the old New York elite and the dominant position she continues to maintain in family matters suggest how female agency can find expression in architectural and interior design decisions.

Building on Cynthia Falk's reading of Olenska and Mingott as allowing Wharton to "undercut and invert the symbolic architectural system ascribed to by the novel's characters, as well as many real life Americans, by praising what they thought inappropriate and denouncing what they valued" (29), I argue that the architectural formulations themselves provide insight into the characters' female agency. Addressing female activity in times of national self-fashioning, as was the United States at the turn of the century, and exploring the methods adopted by individual women engaged with both domestic and public spheres, Wharton sought to defy gender barriers and manipulate female opportunities available in the changing urban environment of New York.

Female Connoisseurship and the Metropolitan Museum

As well as giving rise to a pronounced interest in domestic architecture, the decades around the turn of the nineteenth century saw the foundation of many of America's major cultural institutions, including art museums, city libraries, and city parks. Central Park was completed in 1873, followed by The New York Public Library in 1877 and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1880. These sites were conceived to negotiate and consolidate American national identity. "Designed in part to educate and assimilate the poor and foreign born into mainstream culture," as Benert argues, "the new structures and spaces were also expected to reify an America at last come of age, to reinforce traditional elitist values, and to reproduce social class structure and relationship in a volatile and unpredictable urban environment" ("Wharton

at War" 324). For example, as I have noted elsewhere, Central Park's architects claimed it was designed "to perform an experiment in spatialized democracy […], to nurture the vibrant and resilient democracy of the United States" (Tsimpouki 429). Wharton praised Olmstead's "divine landscape," which stood in marked contrast to "the horrors of the thrice-loathsome New York" (Wharton qtd. in Kassanoff 184, 7).[13] Similarly, the Metropolitan Museum was charged with "encouraging and developing the study of the fine arts […] of advancing general knowledge of kindred subjects, and, to that end, furnishing popular instruction and recreation" (Charter of the Met qtd. in Moske). One of the museum's founders, Joseph H. Choate, expressed the belief that "knowledge of art in its higher forms of beauty would tend directly to humanize, to educate and refine a practical and laborious people" (Choate qtd. in Roeder).

Like women, museums have traditionally been considered keepers of culture. But, despite their common social symbolism, it has been argued that museums have historically been gendered spaces from which women were excluded. There were very few female architects of public institutions in Wharton's time, perhaps because the monumental scale of the buildings was seen to be inherently masculine. While women of Wharton's class figured as donors or visitors to museums, they were excluded from decision-making and curatorial work. Art by female artists was likewise extremely underrepresented, whereas most displayed artwork depicted female subjects. If the museum exterior was perceived as a masculine space, the interior was designed as a space for the male gaze.

In keeping with her lifelong faith in architecture's capacity to shape gender and social norms, Wharton was involved from the outset in the discussion surrounding the museum's "double mission to both transform the mob into 'men' of taste and discrimination, and to provide a sacred site for contemplation and self-renewal" (Hooper-Greenhill). Indeed, these efforts extended the claims she and Codman had made, in *The Decoration of Houses,* regarding the potential for good architectural design to disseminate good taste among the working classes:

> When the rich man demands good architecture neighbors will get it too. The vulgarity of current decoration has its source in the indifference of the wealthy to architectural fitness. Every good moulding, carefully studied detail, exacted by those who can afford to indulge their taste, will in time find to the carpenter-built cottage. (xxi-xxii)

In addition to the spirit of *noblesse oblige* and her cosmopolitan outlook, Wharton's absorbing interest in the new institution of the Museum was

[13] Wharton wrote this in a letter to Sara Norton of 25 July 1905.

reinforced by the fact that her uncle Frederick W. Rhinelander was one of the founding trustees of the Metropolitan Museum and became its president in 1902 (Roffman, *Modernist Annex* 28–29). Her familiarity with the debates surrounding the museum's mission, the purchase of its collections, and the presentation and interpretation of these collections gave her a privileged insight into this critical moment of the museum's formation. At the same time, it is likely that she encountered suspicion due to her gender. Despite the fact that "[u]nder the impact of progressive interest in improving the environment and expanding educational opportunities," there was renewed interest among women to "become active in the widespread movement to establish museums in communities throughout the country and to bring the people the best they could find in art, science, and history" (Miller 10), their contribution remained subsidiary, as most of them operated at the periphery of the museum.

In *The Decoration of Houses*, Wharton pioneered the debate around the important role women might play in creating beautiful domestic places for individual self-expression and sites of male-female interaction, which in turn would reflect on society and would potentially alter the public's cultural perceptions. Evidently, if women could redefine the private sphere, they could also have an impact on public space. Museums, like dwelling spaces, had the power to positively influence society; art institutions could become sites of women's aesthetic education and by extension contribute to the interaction between cultural and political life on a national scale. Moreover, according to Tony Bennett, the advancement of the role of large national museums in Europe and later in the US enabled them to contribute to the formation of its citizens' national identity.

Wharton's first fictional rendering of the cultural role of museums came in 1903 with her novel *Sanctuary*. In this critically neglected piece of fiction, Wharton presents her vision of a museum as an ideal place,[14] a cultural institution which exists in the social world to offer space for the contemplation of art and to provide consolation from that world. Her depiction explores the architecture and design of the building and its complicated relations to the material conditions of its production. Wharton's protagonist, Kate Peyton, questions the museum's ties with economic and political interests. Limited because of her gender to contribute to the museum's cultural role, she projects her vision of the ideal museum onto her architect son.

[14] Roffman calls Wharton's literary production from *Sanctuary* (1903) through *The Age of Innocence* (1920) "museum-novels," arguing that the educational purpose of American museums shifted in those years, resulting in private and public debates about the purpose of aesthetic ideas, connoisseurship, and methods for display (*Modernist Annex* 7–8, 40).

In *The Age of Innocence* culture opens its doors more widely to her female protagonist. Wharton offers an account of Newland Archer's two visits to the Metropolitan Museum, at two different moments in the novel, which are separated by a span of thirty years. That would-be lovers Archer and Olenska choose the public space of the museum as the site of their private rendezvous is understandable, given that "there are no churches … no monuments" in the city that would provide the couple temporary refuge from the prying eyes of Old New Yorkers (257). But, that Wharton should intentionally change the location of the museum when the scene takes place in 1870, from its early position on 14th Street to the site it would occupy several years later, in 1880, attests to the significance the Metropolitan Museum might have as a cultural site.[15] Wharton's anachronistic setting of the scene emphasizes the museum's remoteness and isolation and implicitly associates the site's geographic separation with Catherine Mingott's house. More importantly, however, it relocates the reader's attention from plot complications to the investigation of the interaction of gender, class, and architecture. The museum is much more than the perfect setting for the lovers' clandestine meeting: in Wharton's eyes the museum seems to constitute "a microcosm of gender relations in the larger social and political world but also […] a site for remaking these relations" (Bailkin 120). It is through Ellen's disinterested gaze of the displayed art, her ability to appreciate the aesthetic and educational quality of the Museum's acquisitions that female agency as connoisseurship is reclaimed and the Museum's authority is redeemed.

Wharton stages the secret meeting at the museum, taking the opportunity to comment on the building's architectural structure which she depicts as "the queer wilderness of cast-iron and encaustic tiles" (258). Although the Museum's main hall, with metal arches and a sloping glass roof, was lauded by early visitors as one of the more impressive New York interiors, Wharton's rather ambiguous comment confirms her dislike of its Gothic style. Wharton favored the American Renaissance, which, as already noted, might better promote implicit messages of patriotism and citizenship.

Archer and Olenska bypass the Wolfe collection "whose anecdotic canvases filled one of the main galleries" to seek out a more "melancholy retreat" among the Cesnola antiquities which "mouldered in unvisited loneliness" (258). Wharton's decision to mention Catharine Lorillard Wolfe, "the only woman among the 106 founders of the Metropolitan museum" ("Catharine Lorillard Wolfe") and whose collection "greatly elevat[ed] the profile of public collections of modern art in New York," (Metropolitan Museum of

[15] Originally the museum was located at 681 Fifth Avenue. After a brief move to the Douglas Mansion at 128 West 14th Street, the Museum opened to the public at its current site on Fifth Avenue and 82nd Street.

Art) only to dismiss her, seems strange. Added to this, the collection was not received by the Museum until 1887, whereas the clandestine meeting takes place a decade earlier. These seemingly minor chronological inconsistencies are in fact significant, reflecting a concerted effort on Wharton's part to connect public space and female empowerment.

By directing the reader's attention to the less popular, more esoteric Cesnola Cypriot antiquities, Wharton is able to juxtapose men and women's ability to critique and appreciate art, thus raising questions about male connoisseurship. Upon entering the gallery, Ellen remarks, "It's odd […] I never came here before," to which Archer replies, "Ah well—… Some day, I suppose, it will be a great Museum" (258). While Archer interprets Ellen's remark as referring to the Museum itself, she is actually only referring to this specific space in the edifice. An avid visitor to collections across Europe, she casts a connoisseur's gaze upon "the recovered fragments of Ilium" amassed on the gallery's glass cabinets and the number of "small broken objects—hardly recognizable domestic utensils, ornaments and personal trifles—made of glass, of clay, of discoloured bronze and other time-blurred substances" (258).

According to Roffman, Olenska practices an "ideal kind of looking" that necessitates continued "emphasis […] on simplifying and decluttering the space in which a work of art resides" (*Modernist Annex* 37).[16] This kind of gaze was crucial to Wharton as early as *The Decoration of Houses.* "It seems cruel," Olenska ruefully observes, "that after a while nothing matters … any more than these little things, that used to be necessary and important to forgotten people, and now have to be guessed at under a magnifying glass and labelled: 'Use unknown'" (258). Critics have interpreted her remark as underscoring themes of loss, obsoleteness, and death.[17] However, if one considers Wharton's emphasis throughout the novel on Olenska's female agency, her attention to the domestic artifacts of antiquity can be seen to grant them a kind of "aura" that heightens their aesthetic value and justifies their presence in the museum. Moreover, Wharton juxtaposes Olenska's disinterested gaze, devoid of any desire to possess, to Archer's rapt admiration as he

[16] The "ideal kind of looking" is also repeated in *Sanctuary*: "this novel earnestly contends that a well-designed museum can save a disintegrating society by creating a model for observation and a space in which to practice it" (Roffman, *Modernist Annex* 40).

[17] In *The Ethnography of Manners* Bentley notes that antiquities provide "the field for securing the real," more authentic past (108); Orlando argues that for Archer, Ellen remains a 'vision' that represents the quintessential missed opportunity (192); Kassanoff maintains that the artifacts' impracticality underscores Archer's unfulfilled desire for Olenska (158) as well as the novel's "preoccupation with authenticity" (161). Roffman in "Use Unknown" relates the end of the relationship to the beginning of the museum's cultural impact and their respective potential usefulness (228).

watches Ellen walk across the room, the "light movements of her figure, so girlish even under its heavy furs, the cleverly planted heron-wing in her fur cap, and the way a dark curl lay like a flattened vine-spiral on each cheek above the ear" (258). Wharton's description highlights the gendered nature of Archer's gaze. As Orlando notes, "Wharton constantly directs our gaze to Archer's propensity for objectifying and framing Ellen" (178), transforming her into an object of display for exhibition or possession.[18] Wharton's decision to guide her characters away from the Wolfe collection, which would encourage a voyeuristic, morally suspect, and aesthetically banal male gaze towards the stylish paintings of Bouguereau, Cabanel and Corot corroborates my contention that she wished to challenge traditional gender norms, and, in particular, the power of the gaze in upholding them.[19]

Furthermore, Wharton's decision to draw attention to Luigi Palma di Cesnola's collection is also strategic. Cesnola, who had amassed the unrivalled collection while he was consul in Cyprus, sold it to the newly founded Metropolitan Museum and devoted himself to supervising the work on its installation and publication (New Cypriot Galleries). In 1879 he was appointed as the Museum's first director, a position he kept until his death in 1904. As soon as the Cesnola collection opened to the public in 1880, however, it was furiously attacked by art critics who accused Cesnola of improper restoration and deceptive alteration of the artifacts, suggesting that pieces of the collection were not authentic. The accusations eventually resulted in a sensational three-year trial. Cesnola's lawyer was Joseph H. Choate, one of the Museum's founders. More importantly, Wharton's uncle, Frederick Rhinelander was appointed member of the executive committee at the Metropolitan to investigate the collection's authenticity.[20] As a member of the board of trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rhinelander had played a crucial role in the museum's early plans and decisions, starting with its first

[18] Orlando makes a similar point about Olenska's appreciation of the Cesnola artwork but does not examine its ramifications: "Ellen is a woman who, like Edith Wharton, lives her final days enjoying a rich, artistic life in France. She is marked by what Wharton recognizes as a singular virtue of French culture—what she elsewhere admiringly calls 'the seeing eye.'[…] Wharton carries out her critique of a misguided gaze—an *un*seeing eye—that reads women as representations rather than as representers" (171). Moreover, Orlando argues that "[b]y showing that Ellen has read Huysmans and the Goncourts, Wharton suggests Olenska's awareness of an objectifying, fetishizing male gaze" (187).

[19] The museum scene ends with Archer's indecent look, provoking Olenska's offer to "come" to him "once" (260), which he accepts, after some hesitation.

[20] In her book *From the Modernist Annex: American Women Writers in Museums and Libraries,* Roffman explores Wharton's relation to museums, arguing that the author experienced firsthand the transformation of the museum's cultural role in the decades after the museum's foundation.

major purchase of the Cypriot pieces. The Cesnola controversy raised questions not only about the Board's connoisseurship but mostly about the museum's purpose and orientation—namely, whether the trustees' original lofty aspirations had been abandoned "in favor of a quicker return on their investment," as Roffman argues (*Modernist Annex* 54, 63).

So, why does Wharton, almost half a century after the controversial purchase, revisit the collection, making it the central issue of her discussion? According to Roffman, the Cesnola room constitutes "the originary moment" when the museum shifted its mission from being educational to being "spectacular" (*Modernist Annex* 39). Wharton's increasing disillusionment with the Museum's orientation is arguably apparent in her emphasis on the label displayed next to the collection: "Use unknown." The scene however lends itself to a more nuanced reading, in which the Countess Olenska's gaze serves to redeem the Museum's cultural function. At first glance "unknown," the Museum's use is rendered legible thanks to Olenska's intervention. In this way, Wharton shows how the museum might serve as a site, outside of the domestic sphere, in which female expertise might assert itself—while demonstrating that expertise to be indispensable to the functioning of the cultural sphere. Olenska asserts her superior connoisseurship over Archer's through her ability to appreciate aesthetically common objects of material culture. Through Olenska's disinterested gaze, Wharton is able to validate the Cesnola collection, redeem the Board of Trustees from the miscalculations of male connoisseurship, and restore integrity to the American museum. As the official site of the Metropolitan Museum admits, "the Museum's acquisition of the Cesnola Collection prompted subsequent British and French expeditions intended to furnish European museums with Cypriot material to match that in New York" ("The Cesnola Collection").

To underscore the absent presence of Madame Olenska, it is worth considering Archer's second visit to the museum which takes place twenty-six years after the first one. "[T]he spectacle of those great spaces crowded with the spoils of the ages, where the throng of fashion circulated through a series of scientifically catalogued treasures, had suddenly pressed on a rusted spring of memory," we are told (286–87). Without Olenska at his side, Archer seems unable to experience the Museum as a crucial site of the interaction of educational and cultural life. Archer finds himself in the same Cesnola room in the Museum, but he does not immediately recognize it. An overheard conversation, however, reminds him of the earlier visit: "Why, this used to be one of the Cesnola rooms he heard someone say; and instantly everything about him vanished, and he was sitting alone on a hard leather divan against a radiator, while a slight figure in a long sealskin coat moved away down the meagerly-fitted vistas of the old Museum" (287). Even in

recollection, the Cesnola room contains one exhibit only: the memory of the vanishing Madame Olenska.

This article has shown how Wharton's architectural formulations and female perception of space intervene in order to influence cultural assumptions of gender identity. Wharton's slyly subversive tactics—specifically, her engagement with architecture and decorative art and her depiction of empowered women involved in the act of creating space—brought her conservative politics a certain immunity from feminist and cultural criticism. And yet, in cases like hers, it is appropriate to conclude with Michel de Certeau that tactical practices open up an ensemble of possibilities that slide into the system under the guise of conformity (29).

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