

NOTHING IS TRUE BUT BEAUTY
Oscar Wilde in the Aesthetic Movement

Jennifer S. Adams

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Finally I preface this paper with the wise words of my intellectual inspiration, Oscar Wilde:

It is only about things that do not interest one, that one can give a really unbiased opinion; and this is no doubt the reason why an unbiased opinion is absolutely valueless.

INTRODUCTION

In a New York City lecture hall on a chilly January evening in 1882, Knickerbocker society buzzed with anticipation for its first glimpse of the Apostle of Aestheticism, Oscar Wilde. (Figure 1) They expected a character from Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*, a pure young man "with a lily in his medieval hand."¹ Although there was no lily or sunflower to be seen, they were not disappointed when his six-foot frame entered clad in dress coat, high collar, black velvet knee breeches, silk stockings and white gloves. They were less enthusiastic about his performance after he unrolled his manuscript and began to speak in "a voice that may have come from a tomb."² Not only did he eschew the silly, affected language that was satirized in *Patience* and *Punch*, he delivered a heady lecture called "The English Renaissance," full of Ruskinian philosophy, praise of the Pre-Raphaelites and a dose of Hellenism. He traveled to several East Coast cities with the lecture, yet by the time he returned to New York to speak in Brooklyn, the audience was more interested in looking at the speaker's coattails than listening to his monotonous lecture.³ One critic called it "pretentious, sophomorical, and dull."⁴ After this underwhelming reception, Wilde realized that he needed to please the crowds in order to ensure the continuation of his tour. Like many writers of the day, such as Charles Eastlake and Mary Eliza Haweis⁵, Wilde became an advisor on the artistic home.

Within a month, he wrote two new lectures, "The Decorative Arts" and "The House

¹ W.S. Gilbert, Libretto of *Patience*. The Gilbert and Sullivan Archive. <http://math.boisestate.edu/gas/patience/patienlib.pdf>. Accessed April 18, 2008.

² "Oscar Wilde's Lecture," *The New York Times* (1857-current), Jan. 10, 1882, ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2003), 5.

³ "Oscar Wilde in Brooklyn," *The New York Times* (1857-current), Feb. 4, 1882, ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2003), 2.

⁴ "Mr. Wilde and His Gospel," *The Critic* (1881-1883) Jan 14, 1882, American Periodical Series Online, 13.

⁵ Charles Eastlake and Mary Eliza Haweis wrote interior decoration books that were published on both sides of the Atlantic. Eastlake published *Hints on Household Taste* (1868) and Haweis wrote *The Art of Beauty* (1878) and *The Art of Dress* (1879).

Beautiful,” and dispensed pragmatic advice on how to adapt Aesthetic principles to lives and homes.⁶ It kept his tour going across the United States and Canada until the end of 1882.

Wilde had been insinuating himself into Aesthetic Movement circles since 1877 when, as an Oxford student, he wrote a review of the Grosvenor Gallery’s opening exhibition. He cultivated an image as an effete dandy by wearing a cello-shaped coat, lily boutonnières, and other eye-catching accoutrements. He socialized in the studios of the Pre-Raphaelites, portraitist Frank Miles, and artist James McNeill Whistler and amused the salons of actress Lillie Langtry and socialite Ada Leverson. The Aesthetic Movement was, in part, based around a group of self-proclaimed taste arbiters who assertively delivered their advice to the general public in lectures and in print. As Walter Hamilton, writing in 1882, put it, “the Aesthetes recognize this truth to the fullest extent, but having first laid down certain general principles, they have endeavored to elevate taste into a scientific system. They even go so far as to decide what shall be considered beautiful; and those who do not accept their ruling are termed Philistines, and there is no hope for them.”⁷ Adding to their perceived elitism, the Aesthetes adopted affected language, donned unusual fashions, and hailed beauty above all else. The movement was the perfect *mise en scène* for the budding peacock, and not only because it drew the satirical attentions of George du Maurier and W.S. Gilbert. By 1881, producer Richard D’Oyly Carte recognized in Wilde the perfect incarnation for educating American theatre-goers on the subtler jokes in *Patience*, Gilbert and Sullivan’s operatic send up of the Aesthetes. Wilde was more than happy to assemble a pastiche of himself, Bunthorne, and Grovesnor; purchase an outrageous fur coat; and embark for America. He

⁶ Merlin Holland, “From Madonna Lily to Green Carnation.” in *The Wilde Years: Oscar Wilde and the Art of his Time*, ed. Tomoko Sato and Lionel Lambourne, (London: Barbican Art Galleries, 2000), 20.

⁷ Walter Hamilton, *The Aesthetic Movement in England*, (London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1986), vii.

needed the money, sought adventure, and most importantly, desired attention. As he wrote in 1880 to E.F.S. Pigott, who was examining his draft play, *Vera or the Nihilists*, “I want fame.”⁸

The press on both sides of the Atlantic expected Wilde’s lectures to amuse, condescend or bore his audiences, certainly not impart any useful, intelligent information. An English newspaper observed that in “London, people laugh at Oscar, and certainly would not pay to see him. In America they laugh, but pay.”⁹ American press opinion ranged from mildly complimentary to bemused to scathing. *The Washington Post* called Wilde a “social evil” and a “brainless celebrity.”¹⁰ Cartoonists depicted a languid, long-haired Wilde gazing at sunflowers and blue and white china. Wilde ignored the criticism, confidently declaring that he was there to “diffuse beauty.”¹¹ He delivered his treatise on the English renaissance of beauty and craftsmanship, apparently eschewing his ordained mission to amuse, at least in function if not in form. While some papers continued to criticize, others did report his message and make positive comments. Regardless of the reviews, as he traveled across two countries as an Aesthetic taste advisor, the audiences kept coming.

Even to this day, Wilde is often recognized—and criticized—for his role as the inspiration for Victorian satirists and cartoonists rather than as one of Aestheticism’s intellectual leaders.

In reality, as he lectured across North America, the personification of Aesthetic triviality

⁸ Rupert Hart-Davis and Merlin Holland, ed., *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000), 98

⁹ “An English Opinion of Oscar Wilde,” *Arthur’s Home Magazine* (1880-1897) April 1882, American Periodicals Series Online, 270.

¹⁰ “Mr. Oscar Wilde,” *The Washington Post* (1877-1954), Jan. 4, 1882, ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Washington Post (1877-1990), 2 and “Mr. Wilde and Ourselves,” *The Washington Post* (1877-1954), Jan. 24, 1882, ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Washington Post (1877-1990), 2.

¹¹ “The Chief Yearner,” *Boston Daily Globe* (1872-1922), Jan. 4, 1882. ProQuest Historical Newspapers Boston Globe (1872-1923), 4.

proved his intellectual heft. His American lectures, however expedient for drawing audiences, demonstrated an existing and thorough knowledge of his design reform forebears such as John Ruskin and William Morris, founders of the Arts and Crafts Movement. The lectures also begin to expose the nascence of his ideological independence from these leaders. In the 1880s, Wilde became an eloquent and prominent advocate of the art for art's sake argument, part of a small but influential countervailing force in Victorian visual arts and literature. He first boldly stated his allegiance to that philosophy in 1882 and would continue to write and lecture about it alongside his design reform views.

On his return to England, Wilde settled into middle class Victorian life by marrying and establishing his own household. Once again, he proved his commitment to the Aesthetic Movement by turning his oft-professed advice into reality. He partnered with Aestheticism's leading designer E.W. Godwin to create an ideal interior for his marital home. From its artistically-appointed study looking out on Tite Street, Wilde continued to write about his Aesthetic principles into the early 1890s, setting a path both artistically and politically that diverged from the burgeoning Arts and Crafts movement.

Wilde is deservedly remembered as an icon of the nineteenth century for his sublime wit and his singular image; however, that status often obscures his contributions to the Aesthetic Movement. A close examination of his lectures, essays, and his home reveal a man of intellectual rigor, creative spirit, and progressive outlook who influenced the direction of art and interiors at the end of the Victorian era. While even he did not claim complete success for the Aesthetic Movement within his lifetime, Wilde and his colleagues set the stage for the dramatic changes in the visual arts that the modernists asserted in the twentieth century.

CHAPTER ONE

WILDE'S WORLD: Aestheticism and the Victorian Milieu

The Aesthetic Movement arose from two cultural and artistic imperatives in the mid-nineteenth century: design reform and the belief in the concept of art for art's sake. Both were reactions against prevailing tastes and norms in art and domestic interiors. Design reform, which actually split into several doctrines, originated in the middle of the century. At the 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition, the exhibition's organizers gloriously celebrated the proliferation of machine-made goods produced and consumed by the working and middle classes. However, a newly-formed cadre of design critics viewed their enthusiasm, along with the quality of many of the products, with suspicion and, in some cases, derision. The British, and later the Americans, responded with reform movements that attempted to educate artists and consumers in proper taste and design and to stem the flow of cheap, ugly machine-made goods.

While the Aesthetic Movement sought these design reforms, it was equally interested in liberating Victorian art from confining moral strictures. The Victorian art establishment believed that art should, at a minimum, tell a story if not impart a cautionary message, as William Holman Hunt, among many others, often expressed in his paintings (Figure 2). The Aesthetes resisted any obvious intent in the subject matter of art. They instead took inspiration from the mid-century writings of Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire, and Théophile Gautier, who believed that poetry should be appreciated for its beauty, not its meaning, and that a poem is written simply for its own sake.

Formalized as the term “*l’art pour l’art*,” or “art for art’s sake,” the belief had its origins in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹² Edgar Allan Poe asserted the nineteenth-century version on the western side of the Atlantic. In 1849 his essay “The Poetic Principle” extols the exquisite beauty of a poem:

“It has been assumed . . . that the ultimate object of all Poetry is Truth. Every poem, it is said, should inculcate a moral; and by this moral is the poetical merit of the work to be adjudged . . . We have taken it into our heads that to write a poem simply for the poem’s sake, and to acknowledge such to have been our design, would be to confess ourselves radically wanting in the true Poetic dignity and force:—but the simple fact is, that, would we but permit ourselves to look into our souls, we should immediately there discover that under the sun there neither exists nor can exist any work thoroughly dignified—more supremely noble than this very poem—this poem per se—this poem which is a poem and nothing more—this poem written solely for the poem’s sake.”¹³

Poe’s influence would soon surface in France in the work of two art critics and poets, Théophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire. Gautier not only transformed Poe’s ideal of a “poem for poem’s sake” to the more universal “*l’art pour l’art*,”¹⁴ he also expanded on Poe’s notion of the unnecessary moral obligation in poetry and thus art. In the preface to his novel, *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, he pointedly refutes the moralistic and priggish critics who interpret his work as a sign of his own depravity: “It is one of the manias of these little scribblers with tiny minds, always to substitute the author for the work.” He continued by rejecting the notion that poets should discern the problems of society and produce “philanthropic” poetry that attempts to ameliorate those problems through moralistic messages.¹⁵

¹² John Garber Palache, *Gautier and the Romantics*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1926), 120.

¹³ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Poetic Principle,” *Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, (New York: Vintage Press, 1975), 892. The essay was first published posthumously in 1850.

¹⁴ John Cassidy, *Algernon C. Swinburne*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc. 1964) 43.

¹⁵ Théophile Gautier, *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, trans. by Joanna Richardson, (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1981), 34-6.

Charles Baudelaire drew influences directly from Poe and Gautier and wrote laudatory essays on both men in the early 1850s. Of Poe he stated that he is “the best writer I know” and highlighted his seminal aestheticism by recognizing “that insatiable love of beauty which is his greatest claim.”¹⁶ In his essay on Gautier, he quoted both poets in saying:

“A whole crowd of people imagine that the aim of poetry is some sort of lesson, that its duty is to fortify conscience, or to perfect social behavior, or even finally, to demonstrate something or other that is useful. If we will even briefly look into ourselves, question our souls, bring to mind our moments of enthusiasm, poetry will be seen to have no other aim but itself; it can have no other, and no poem will be as great, as noble, so truly worthy of the name “poem” as the one written for no purpose other than the pleasure of writing a poem.”¹⁷

Furthermore, he echoed Poe almost directly when he suggested a tripartite definition of human perception: “Pure intellect pursues truth, taste reveals beauty to us, and moral sense shows us the path of duty.”¹⁸ The concept of taste revealing beauty as well as the divorcing of taste from moral duty would echo in the philosophy of the Aesthetic Movement and the words of Oscar Wilde.

Baudelaire’s work and philosophy spawned an English disciple in Algernon Charles Swinburne. The poet was a member of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood at Oxford in the 1850s, chiefly admiring the philosophy and work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti.¹⁹ Like Gautier in France, Swinburne used his poetry and essays to challenge the morality and religion of British “Philistines.” Known for poems about his own unusual sexual predilections, Swinburne vigorously defended Baudelaire’s infamous book *Les Fleurs du Mal* which contained such controversial poems as the “*Litanies de Satan*.” In a published article,

¹⁶ Charles Baudelaire, *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. by P.E. Charvet, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972) 185-7.

¹⁷ Baudelaire, 1972, 266.

¹⁸ Baudelaire, 1972, 266, see also Poe, 1975, 893.

¹⁹ Cassidy, 1964, 47.

Swinburne established his position that “art has nothing to do with morals and didactics.” He went on to state that even the most repulsive subjects can be made beautiful by a perfect poem, even creating a defiant syllogism: Baudelaire’s poems are immoral yet beautiful, and beauty is moral; therefore Baudelaire’s poems are moral.²⁰ Certainly not all proponents of art for art’s sake believed that the separation of taste and morality should break the bounds of propriety. By the end of *Dorian Gray*, even Wilde seemed to condemn the debased life of Dorian who lived only for himself and his pleasures. Furthermore, the excesses of Swinburne’s views undoubtedly contributed to a certain level of popular unease with the Aesthetes, explaining, in part, the satires of *Punch* and *Patience*, and certainly reinforcing the perceived connection between Aestheticism and the French *Décadence* in the 1890s.

Poe, Gautier, Baudelaire, and Swinburne were significant influences on Oscar Wilde, who believed that poetry was the highest form of art. However, he recognized that the art for art’s sake philosophy need not be confined to the written word. Wilde, along with Walter Pater and James McNeill Whistler, translated it to the visual arts. They argued that art belonged not in the realms of morality or rationality, but in a world of spirit and emotion. They believed that art could not and should not improve or change individual lives except at the moment when it brought pleasurable sensations to the viewer. While Pater and Whistler based their views almost exclusively in painting, Wilde advocated that art for art’s sake was also a tenet of design reform. In doing so, he helped placed the Aesthetic Movement on a different path from contemporaneous reformers.

²⁰ Cassidy, 1964, 68-9.

The design reform movements that operated across the late nineteenth century were multilayered and, at times, oppositional. At one level, the social reformers, such as John Ruskin and William Morris in Britain and Charles Leland²¹ in the U.S., wanted to fundamentally change manufacturing, labor practices, and art education in order to improve the lives of workers as well as their products. The ornament classifiers, such as Owen Jones and Ralph Nicholson Wornum²², wanted design fidelity to historical rules of decoration and produced instructional manuals for achieving the appropriate results. Finally, the taste advisors created a publishing industry by dispensing interior design guidance to the middle class, whom they viewed as desperately lacking in decorating sense. Charles Eastlake, Mary Eliza Haweis and the American Mariana Griswold van Rensselaer²³, among others, attempted to guide the consumer through the new world of manufactured household goods and save the average home from senseless clutter and melancholic colors. Eastlake summarized their goal in the introduction to *Hints on Household Taste*, saying that the majority of the British public was indifferent to art, but “inasmuch as the number of artistically appointed houses is steadily increasing, it is to be hoped that those who have had no opportunity of forming a judgment on such matters will by degrees take their cue from others of more cultivated taste.”²⁴

“Others of more cultivated taste” was a definition for the Aesthetic Movement. Wilde and his allies believed that they had refined taste and an innate sense of beauty. It was their

²¹ Leland, director of the Public Industrial Art School in Philadelphia, advocated for art education for all public school students.

²² Jones published *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856); Nicholson published *Analysis of Ornament: The Characteristics of Styles* (1893).

²³ Van Rensselaer was a prominent design and architecture critic in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, best known for her biography of architect H.H. Richardson.

²⁴ Charles L. Eastlake, *Hints in Household Taste*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1969), xxii.

vocation to spread that knowledge to acquisitive, yet undereducated, homeowners. Although many professed sympathy for labor reform, they were ultimately concerned with the consumption, not production, of objects. Surface beauty took precedence as the ultimate quality of an object, regardless of how it made or by whom. So, in an increasingly secular and scientifically-based world, the Aesthetes thought that they could write the rules for beauty for everyone to follow and guide them to the House Beautiful. As Wilde explained to an American reporter, “beauty is nearer to most of us than we are aware. The material is all around us but we want a systematic way of bringing it out. The science of how to get at it is what I came to lecture about.”²⁵

How art and design became such complicated matters that they required the auspices of the design reformers and taster advisers requires a brief examination of the economic developments and social conditions of the period. Born in 1854, Wilde witnessed in his lifetime a progressive, tumultuous, and liberating world that was being transformed socially, politically and economically. They were often angst-ridden, uncertain times, and design reform was only one manifestation of a perceived need to guide the public through a paradigm shift. Part of the movement reacted with anti-modernist fervor. The Arts and Crafts advocates sought to guide the tastes of average homeowners faced with new choices; yet its chief proponents, including Morris, reacted against current decorating trends by seeking solutions in the past: medievalism, hand labor and historicist forms. The Aesthetic Movement, by contrast, operated within, rather than against, modern forces in a world that saw a changing urban landscape, liberalizing politics, more freedom for women, the fruits of increasing globalization, and increased wealth throughout the population. As choice and

²⁵ “The Chief Yearner.” *Boston Daily Globe* (1872-1922), Jan. 4, 1882. ProQuest Historical Newspapers Boston Globe (1872-1923), 4.

consumption grew, the Aesthetes attempted to define acceptable parameters for dealing with many new forms of art and decoration, both domestic and international. The results were somewhat amorphous. It never had a strongly identifiable visual expression and few homes at the time would be termed purely Aesthetic, but its progressive precepts and designs, particularly the quest for simplicity, would lay the groundwork for modernism.

The Industrial Revolution with its concomitant increases in machine-produced goods, compartmentalized labor, and urbanization had far-reaching social, political and economic effects, including specific consequences for design and interiors. Industrialization created wealth and not just for the factory owners, who indeed became very wealthy—by the 1880s, twenty-five percent of peerages went to the “trade;” that is, manufacturers.²⁶ Laborers, while not highly paid, had disposable income to feed their families as well as purchase a few non-essential goods. More importantly, as workers moved to the urban centers for employment, the possibility and desirability of home ownership increased. In Britain, the demand was met with speculatively-built homes in new suburbs around manufacturing cities. Between the midpoint and end of the century, the number of houses being built doubled.²⁷ The social mandate for ownership became equally important, with American preacher Henry Ward Beecher telling workers that home ownership should be their aim.²⁸ Increased disposable income and upward mobility led to the swelling ranks of the middle class in both countries.

As workers moved from field to city and no longer had to provide their own sustenance, they were able to enjoy some leisure time outside of work hours, including shopping. At the same time that discretionary income increased, consumer markets expanded allowing for

²⁶ A.N. Wilson, *The Victorians*, (London: Arrow Books, 2003), 482.

²⁷ Helen Long, *The Edwardian House*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 6.

²⁸ Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America*, (New York: Hill & Wang, 2007), 149.

greater choice, greater aspiration and, potentially, greater confusion. The middle class endeavored to identify more closely with the rich elite while distancing itself socially from the working classes.²⁹ They did so by adopting social customs of the aristocracy such as paying calls on each other.³⁰ In addition, they emulated their interiors with costly reproductions—mainly in the French styles—in lieu of originals, and by substituting quantity for quality.³¹ The growing retail market aided their consumption. The department store appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century, compartmentalizing shopping the way the factory atomized labor. Liberty's, Debenhams, Macy's and Marshall Fields offered specialized departments and stratified offerings that met almost every consumer's needs. Furthermore, they turned shopping into an activity with aspects of necessity and entertainment.³² With so many choices, desires and social signifiers to assimilate, the late nineteenth-century middle class consumers turned of necessity to the taste arbiters who were ready with advice to ensure that they made the appropriate decisions for their homes and families.

For both retailers and taste advisors, the audience was increasingly women. Both in perception and reality, women gained more freedoms in the latter half of the nineteenth century. By the 1880s in Britain, married women gained control of their own property, women could vote in local and school elections and many could receive an education at a number of new women's colleges, modeled on the founding of Vassar in 1865.³³ Dress

²⁹ Eric Hobsbawn, *The Age of Empire 1875-1914*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987), 168.

³⁰ Long, 1993, 9-10

³¹ Nicholas Cooper, *The Opulent Eye: Late Victorian and Edwardian Taste in Interior Design*, (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1977), 7.

³² Trachtenberg, 2007, 132-5.

³³ Simon Schama, *A History of Britain 1776 – 2000: The Fate of Empire*, (London: BBC Worldwide Ltd., 2002), 186 and Wilson, 2003, 421.

reform, of which Wilde and Godwin were vocal advocates, became a metaphor for increased freedom of movement in addition to a healthful change. Yet despite progress in society, the home remained the woman's domain and running it efficiently was her mission. As a result, retailers recognized women as a key driver of consumption and the increasingly sophisticated advertising industry directed its efforts at them.³⁴ Meanwhile as their household duties became more complex, women sought advice on servants, entertaining, childrearing, and decorating. Mrs. Beeton³⁵, Mrs. Haweis, *Godey's Ladies' Book*, and many magazines and books answered with instructions, admonitions, and images of perfect homes, furnishings, and fashion. Even Wilde joined the women's publishing ranks in 1888 when he became editor of *The Lady's World* monthly, insisting that the name be changed to the "less vulgar" *The Woman's World*.³⁶

The design reform movements may have been based, in part, in an effort to eliminate French-looking décor from English households, but they did not prevent international influence. In fact, the Aesthetic Movement embraced it. Trade globalized in the latter half of the nineteenth century as the world arrived on steamership. Great Britain went from manufacturing almost everything that it needed in the first part of the century, to importing key finished products like cloth and glassware in the last quarter. It imported many of those items from America, which experienced the reverse trend across the century.³⁷ Both

³⁴ Hobsbawm, 1987, 203.

³⁵ Mrs. Beeton wrote articles for a ladies household magazine, compiling them in 1861 into *The Book of Household Management Comprising information for the Mistress, Housekeeper, Cook, Kitchen-Maid, Butler, Footman, Coachman, Valet, Upper and Under House-Maids, Lady's-Maid, Maid-of-all-Work, Laundry-Maid, Nurse and Nurse-Maid, Monthly Wet and Sick Nurses, etc. etc.—also Sanitary, Medical, & Legal Memoranda: with a History of the Origin, Properties, and Uses of all Things Connected with Home Life and Comfort*.

³⁶ Hart-Davis, 2000, 317.

³⁷ Michael Snodin and John Styles, *Design and the Decorative Arts: Britain 1500–1900*, (London: V&A Publications, 2001), 326.

countries hosted world's fairs that displayed the goods and decorative arts of colonies and countries around the world. After the U.S. opened Japan in the 1850s, the British held the first major exhibition of Japanese wares in 1862. A new style was born as Liberty's built an Asian emporium on Regent's Street and Tiffany & Co. designed and sold Japanesque silver on Fifth Avenue. In London Moroccan-style smoking rooms became the rage. (Figure 3) It all added to the vibrancy and complexity of the Victorian visual world.

Oscar Wilde negotiated all the intellectual, economic and social forces that moved the late nineteenth-century society, and like the Aesthetic Movement, he worked sometimes within and sometimes against those forces. As a proponent of the art for art's sake philosophy, he was a maverick, diverging from the prevailing practices of contemporary artists and critics. Even at home, his opinion was controversial. Constance Lloyd wrote to him after their engagement, "I'm afraid you and I disagree in our opinions on art, for I hold that there is no perfect art without perfect morality. Whilst you say that they are distinct and separable things and of course you have your knowledge to combat my ignorance with."³⁸

As for the evolving world around him, Wilde was a keen observer and delighted in its challenges. He did not react against it with anti-modern fervor as other design reformers did. Although he had a deep reverence for the past, particularly classical Greece, he believed in progress that was tempered with an artistic prerogative. He could see the roots of beauty in many manifestations of the modern world. Both at home and on tour, he criticized the ugly, such as polluted Canadian rivers, unspeakably hideous American cast iron stoves, and stultifying English fashion; and he exalted the beautiful, such as Japanese art, the products of Morris & Co., and the elegant flow of a Colorado miner's coat. He would even claim a

³⁸ Constance Lloyd to Wilde, November 11, 1883, Oscar Wilde papers, Eccles Bequest, Add. 81690, Manuscript Reading Room, British Library, London, UK.

reverence for machinery as long as it was used for noble purposes and not as replacement for humans in the production of art.³⁹

Like the design reform movement that he espoused, Wilde believed that all of the elements for a sanguine life and artistic home could be found in the modern world. Yet, he was certain that he was among the elite few who could identify and pass the knowledge to the benighted consumer. As he lectured in North America, he melded his academic training and his understanding of earlier design reform philosophies with the experiences of the society through which he traveled. He assimilated them into his aesthetic theory and reflected those observations back to his audience. He found ideal beauty in the modern world.

³⁹ Oscar Wilde, "Art and the Handicraftsman" in *Essays and Lectures*, ed. by Robert Ross, (London: Methuen & Co., 1909), 177.

CHAPTER TWO

WILDE'S AMERICAN LECTURES: An Aesthetic Cocktail

Wilde's rapid transformation from apostle of beauty to design reformer and decorator is remarkable. He rewrote "The English Renaissance" lecture into "The Decorative Arts" within a month, retaining many of its elements but adding design reform dogma and dispensing specific decorating advice about wallpaper, furniture and carpets, among other furnishings.⁴⁰ In addition, as he traveled across the United States and Canada, he added observations—and criticism—on regional architecture and decoration. It was a quick transition for a man whom his critics considered a trivial poseur, and indeed, it did not necessarily come naturally to him. He was a Classics scholar who thought himself more poet than art critic, and as a 28-year-old bachelor, he had little practical experience in interior decoration. The answer lies in Wilde's ability to adapt and assimilate influences, a talent he would use often throughout his career. Wilde's lecture sources range across the art writers and critics of the late nineteenth century. He drew some influences from his life, such as his professor, John Ruskin, and friend, James McNeill Whistler. Others he simply lifted from popular literature, such as W.J. Loftie and Mary Eliza Haweis. Some critics called the results derivative—one subtitled "The English Renaissance" "Ruskin and water".⁴¹ The charge has its merits. Yet, the lectures demonstrate Wilde's obvious knowledge and understanding of

⁴⁰ Wilde edited his lectures throughout his North American tour. He delivered "The English Renaissance" for the first month, switching entirely to "The Decorative Arts" in Chicago in March 1882. He only used "The House Beautiful" in cities where he had given previous lectures. Manuscript versions survive for "The English Renaissance" and "The Decorative Arts" although different versions have been published over the past century. In 1908, Robert Ross published "The English Renaissance" and "Art and the Handicraftsman" which is the first version of "The Decorative Arts." Canadian scholar Kevin O'Brien has conducted extensive work on the lecture manuscripts. He published a later version of "The Decorative Arts" and reconstructed "The House Beautiful" based on contemporary newspaper articles that frequently printed large sections of Wilde's lectures. See O'Brien, "The House Beautiful: A Reconstruction of Oscar Wilde's American Lecture." *Victorian Studies* 17 (June 1974), 395-418. These four published lectures, Ross's and O'Brien's, are used as the basis of this paper.

⁴¹ O'Brien, 1974, 395.

design reform tenets before he left England. In reality, taking the metaphor a bit further, Wilde's lectures can be likened to a cocktail. His basic recipe was two parts Morris mixed with one part Ruskin and a twist of Pater.

John Ruskin

John Ruskin, Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford, was an enduring force in English art when Oscar Wilde arrived at the university on scholarship in 1874. He had been the champion of Turner, an early supporter of the Pre-Raphaelites and a keystone in the establishment of Gothic as the inalienable national architecture of England. By force of his reputation and personality, he cultivated discipleship. Wilde not only attended Ruskin's much anticipated lectures, such as "The Aesthetic and Mathematic Schools of Art in Florence," he was even inspired to physical labor. When Ruskin asked Oxford's young men to eschew pointless sport in order to lift spade and ax to build a road between Upper and Lower Hinksey in Oxfordshire, the young dilettante joined the effort. Not naturally drawn to physical endeavors, sportive or otherwise, Wilde nevertheless bragged that "he was allowed to fill 'Mr. Ruskin's especial wheelbarrow' and of being instructed by the master himself in the mysteries of wheeling such a vehicle from place to place."⁴² However, as Wilde told it in one of his lectures, the road, "well, like a bad lecture it ended abruptly," abandoned and unfinished.⁴³ Their relationship extended beyond Wilde's Oxford years. In 1879 in London, Wilde wrote to a friend that he was going "with Ruskin to see [Henry] Irving as Shylock."⁴⁴ In addition, years later Wilde demonstrated his lasting reverence when he sent Ruskin his recently published book of fairy tales, saying in the accompanying letter, "There is in you

⁴² Richard Ellman, *Oscar Wilde*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 49-50.

⁴³ Wilde, "Art and the Handicraftsman" in *Essays and Lectures*, 1909, 194.

⁴⁴ Hart-Davis, 2000, 85.

something of prophet, of priest, and of poet, and to you the gods gave eloquence such as they have given to none other, so that your message might come to us with the fire of passion, and the marvel of music, making the deaf to hear, and the blind to see.”⁴⁵

While some American critics viewed Wilde’s lecture as “Ruskin and water,” Wilde only borrowed from a portion of Ruskin’s prodigious writings and departed quite explicitly from his mentor in 1882. Wilde focused primarily on Ruskin’s definition of beauty based in nature, his admiration for the Pre-Raphaelites and his philosophy of art and labor. Illustrative of a young scholar finding his own path, Wilde would almost directly quote Ruskin and then, within the same lecture, make a statement with which Ruskin would certainly disagree.

Wilde reflects Ruskin most strongly in his conception of art, labor and the environment for good design. In “The Nature of Gothic” chapter of *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin outlines the superior qualities of medieval architecture. For him, the Gothic was natural, variable, imperfect and savage, superior to classical perfection and Renaissance decadence. Underlying these Gothic elements was the artist-worker, the man whose individual expression and intellect made his work, and therefore his product, noble and honest. Ruskin believed that England, like ancient Greece, made the worker servile and inferior, giving him repetitive, simple tasks in a quest for perfected production. It made the worker little more than a tool, and most regrettably, created pagan art. The medieval worker, by contrast, worked within a Christian context that recognized the “individual value in every soul.” The “ugly” statue of the Gothic cathedral was beautiful because it represented the free expression of the man

⁴⁵ Hart-Davis, 2000, 349.

who created it.⁴⁶ In the conclusion of *The Stones of Venice*, he distilled human accomplishment to three sources: hand-work, head-work and heart-work. The hand and head motivated the worker to a misplaced sense of perfection and accuracy; “whereas heart-work, which is the one work we want is not only independent of both, but often, in great degree, inconsistent with either. Here, therefore, let me finally and firmly enunciate the great principle to which all that has hitherto been stated is subservient—that art is valuable or otherwise only as it expresses the personality, activity, and living perception of a good and great human soul.”⁴⁷

Throughout his lectures, Wilde echoed Ruskin’s veneration of the worker and the contrast of modern and medieval times. In “The Decorative Arts” he told his audience that the Gothic building told the story of the builders, it was a reflection of what they loved.

“Contrast these with our public buildings: a workman is given a design stolen from a Greek temple and does it because he is paid for doing it—the worst reason for doing anything; no modern stonecutter could leave the stamp of this age upon his work as the ancient workmen did.”⁴⁸ Wilde updated Ruskin’s concern for the worker with the contemporary dilemma of the machine. Wilde believed that man-made decoration expressed the worker’s individuality, the joy in his work, while the machine reduced decoration to repetitive task with an ugly result.⁴⁹ “Let us have everything perfectly bare of ornament rather than have any machine-made ornament; ornament should represent the feeling in a man’s life, as of course nothing

⁴⁶ John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice, Volume II*, (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1979), 158-163.

⁴⁷ Robert Hewison, *John Ruskin: The Argument of the Eye*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 137.

⁴⁸ Oscar Wilde, “The Decorative Arts,” in Kevin O’Brien, *Oscar Wilde in Canada*, (Toronto: Personal Library, Publishers, 1982), 157.

⁴⁹ Wilde, “The English Renaissance,” in *Essay and Lectures*, 1909, 152.

machine-made can do; and, by the way, a man who works with his hands alone is only a machine.”⁵⁰

Although Wilde showed concern for the worker’s “soul,” he had a greater interest in art and beauty and creating an environment in which they could flourish. Ruskin had equated beautiful art with societal factors stating that “if the art of a nation is beautiful, it is because its society is noble, and Victorian art is ugly because Victorian society is ugly.”⁵¹ In “The Two Paths” he stated that good design was impossible “so long as you don’t surround your men with happy influences and beautiful things.” He rejected, however, government design schools, like the South Kensington school, as a solution to the poor design problem.⁵² An artist trained at a design school is merely reduced to a servant, producing art dictated by society.

Wilde spoke of surroundings and art education as frequently as any other theme in his lectures. The great eras of decorative art had beautiful buildings and lovely costumes to inspire its workers, therefore America should emulate that environment:

“All the teaching in the world is of no avail in art unless you surround your workman with happy influences and with delightful things; it is impossible for him to have right ideas about color unless he sees the lovely colors of nature unspoiled about him, impossible for him to supply beautiful incident and action in his work unless he sees beautiful incident and action in the world about him, for to cultivate sympathy, you must be among living things and thinking about them, and to cultivate admiration you must be among beautiful things and looking at them. And so your houses and streets should be living schools of art where your workman may see beautiful forms as he goes to his work in the morning and returns to his home at eventide.”⁵³

⁵⁰ Wilde, “The House Beautiful,” in O’Brien, 1982, 167.

⁵¹ Quoted in Hewison, 1976, 133.

⁵² Hewison, 1976, 171.

⁵³ Wilde, “The Decorative Arts,” in O’Brien, 1982, 155.

Wilde departed from Ruskin on the importance of art schools and believed that art education was culturally and practically significant. First, he encouraged workshops be integrated into the daily school curriculum stating that children would “learn more of the lessons of life and of the morality of art than in years of book study. And you would soon raise up a race of handicraftsmen who would transform the face of your country.”⁵⁴

Practically speaking, he argued that art schools should partner with manufacturers to provide product designs for wallpapers, carpets and other household decoration.⁵⁵ This was not pure rhetoric. Wilde visited the Public Industrial Art School of Charles Leland in Philadelphia and used student-made objects as lecture props to promote the success of the school.⁵⁶ He thought so much of this particular mission that he wrote to his friend, Mrs. George Lewis, that “in every city they start schools of decorative art after my visit, and set on foot public museums, getting my advice about the choice of objects and the nature of the building.”⁵⁷ Boastful exaggeration, no doubt, but it is an indication of how Wilde sincerely hoped to influence art education and craftsmanship in North America.

Wilde also took his mission to “diffuse beauty” seriously, and he based his conception of beauty on the Slade Professor’s philosophy. Ruskin believed that beauty derived from nature and truth, and that aesthetics were always subordinate to both. In “The Lamp of Beauty” he stated that, with few exceptions, beauty comes from the imitation of nature. “Man cannot advance in the invention of beauty, without directly imitating natural form.”⁵⁸ He objected to the abstraction of natural forms for decorative purpose. While he admitted the difficulty of

⁵⁴ Wilde, “The Decorative Arts,” in O’Brien, 1982, 163.

⁵⁵ Wilde, “The House Beautiful,” in O’Brien, 1982, 166.

⁵⁶ Hart-Davis, 2000, 170.

⁵⁷ Hart-Davis, 2000, 144.

⁵⁸ John Ruskin, *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, (New York: E.R. Dumont, Publishers, n.d.), 100-1.

accurately rendering foliage, some naturally-derived patterns, such as egg and dart, were acceptable while leaf-like “meaningless scrolls” were inappropriate for architecture. Equally distasteful was linear excess. He called the Greek fret “a vile concatenation of straight lines.”⁵⁹ In painting, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood won his praise because they had “but one principle, that of absolute uncompromising truth in all that it does, obtained by working everything, down to the most minute detail, from nature and from nature only.”⁶⁰ Although he had strong opinions on the nature of beauty, Ruskin criticized the modern age for venerating it above truth and morality. He preferred the motivation of ancient artists, for “when the entire purpose of art was moral teaching, it naturally took truth for its first object, and beauty, and the pleasure resulting from beauty, only for its second. But when it lost all purpose of moral teaching, it as naturally took beauty for its object, and truth for its second.”⁶¹

Wilde not only believed that the natural world was the appropriate basis for beautiful art, in a rapidly changing age, he believed that artistic creation could inspire an appreciation of nature:

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.⁶²

⁵⁹ Ruskin, n.d., 103-4.

⁶⁰ Ruskin, n.d., 330.

⁶¹ Ruskin, n.d., 321.

⁶² Wilde, “The House Beautiful,” in O’Brien, 1982, 180-1.

Paradoxically, he encouraged an approach that eschewed historical precedents while embracing modern life: “Now, the Greeks sculptured gods and goddesses because they loved them, and the Middle Ages, saints and kings because they believed in them. But the saint is now hardly prominent enough a feature to become a motive for high art, and the day of kings and queens is gone; and so art should now sculpture the men who cover the world with a network of iron and the sea with ships.” He goes so far as to say reverence for industry will help bridge the gap between capital and labor.⁶³ In addition, he frequently admonishes his American audience to ignore the art of other nations and take from their own natural surroundings. “Let the Greek carve his lions and the Goth his dragons: buffalo and wild deer are the animals for you.”⁶⁴ It is a progressive view with which Ruskin would almost certainly disagree.

While in America, Wilde departed publicly from Ruskin’s insistence on truth and morality in art. Wilde’s differing opinion was already evident in his first lecture when he told his audience that the Western art tradition had burdened art with “intellectual doubts and sorrows.” He explained that “in its primary aspect a painting has no more spiritual message or meaning than an exquisite fragment of Venetian glass or a blue tile from the wall of Damascus.”⁶⁵ He placed the aesthetic above the intellectual, stating that “the good we get from art is not what we derive directly, but what improvement is made in us by being accustomed to the sight of all comely and gracious things.”⁶⁶ Throughout the spring of 1882, he worked with Philadelphia publisher J.M. Stoddart to produce a book of poetry by his

⁶³ Wilde, “The Decorative Arts,” in O’Brien, 1982, 160.

⁶⁴ Wilde, “Art and the Handicraftsman” in *Essays and Lectures*, 1909, 186-7.

⁶⁵ Wilde, “The English Renaissance,” in *Essay and Lectures*, 1909, 134.

⁶⁶ Wilde, “The Decorative Arts,” in O’Brien, 1982, 161.

friend, Rennell Rodd. In the introduction to *Rose Leaf and Apple Leaf*, Wilde defined the Aesthetic Movement: “This increased sense of the absolutely satisfying value of beautiful workmanship, this recognition of the primary importance of the sensuous element in art, this love of art for art’s sake, is the point in which we of the younger school have made a departure from the teaching of Mr. Ruskin—a departure definite and different and decisive.”⁶⁷ He praised Ruskin for inspiring his love of beauty, but honed in on a key difference. “The keystone to his aesthetic system is ethical,” Wilde said. Ruskin judged art by the “noble moral ideas” it expressed. For Wilde, a painting could touch his soul in more ways than simply its truth.⁶⁸ As he traveled across America, his “Ruskin and water” became increasingly diluted and Wilde expressed his own set of critical values.

Explaining Wilde’s split from Ruskin as the influence of other aesthetes, such as Whistler and Walter Pater, is accurate but overly simplistic. Wilde could never completely reconcile himself to Ruskin’s philosophy because of two particular factors: his Hellenism and his secularism. They both emerged in his Oxford days and became increasing evident in his work of the early 1880s.

John Ruskin was devoted to the medieval. For him, classical art was colorless, repetitive, linear and pagan. Oscar Wilde, by contrast, was inspired by the Greek world, believing it the foundation of beauty. Even while studying under Ruskin at Oxford, his notebooks betrayed his captivation with the classical. For him, Greek existence was infused with beauty, noting “life came naturally to the Greeks as a very beautiful thing, we ‘whom the hungry generations tread down’ barely can attain to the gladness that was their immediate

⁶⁷ Oscar Wilde, “L’Envoi,” in *Art and Decoration: Being Abstracts from Reviews and Miscellanies*, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1920), 120.

⁶⁸ Wilde, “L’Envoi,” in *Art and Decoration*, 1920, 121.

heritage.”⁶⁹ Like his Aesthetic Movement contemporaries, he believed the Greeks used the eye as the vehicle of discernment. Although he equates the quality of Greek literature with its visual arts, he believed that ultimately for the Greeks “the eye and not the ear or mind was the chosen vehicle of passion.”⁷⁰ Within the first paragraphs of his first lecture, Wilde melds his Hellenism with Ruskin’s Gothic, claiming that the “English Renaissance” is both Greek and medieval “taking from one its cleanness of vision and its sustained calm, from the other its variety of expression and the mystery of its vision.”⁷¹ In the speech, he encouraged Americans to establish their own artistic revival using their “Hellenic” spirit. America, rather than countries with old traditions and ruins, could utilize its young spirit and the “immediate heritage” that made the Greek world so wonderful.⁷²

His attraction to the pagan undoubtedly contributed to his artistic secularism. To say that Wilde was secular is not to say that he was irreligious. He was an Irish Protestant who flirted with Catholicism throughout his life until he took last rites on his deathbed. Ruskin believed that the recognition of beauty was synonymous with the recognition of God, and that the superiority of the Gothic was based in its Christian expression.⁷³ In his lectures, Wilde never connected art to God or Christianity and, with his rhetoric, raised beauty to its own devotional plane. Beauty brought joy, health, strength, nobility and grace; there is “nothing in life that art cannot sanctify.”⁷⁴ He predicted dire consequences for people who did not bring beauty into their lives: “Why, I have seen wallpaper which must lead a boy brought up

⁶⁹ Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand, ed., *Oscar Wilde’s Oxford Notebooks: A Portrait of Mind in the Making*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 135.

⁷⁰ Smith and Helfand, 1989, 138.

⁷¹ Wilde, “The English Renaissance,” in *Essay and Lectures*, 1909, 112.

⁷² Wilde, “The English Renaissance,” in *Essay and Lectures*, 1909, 140.

⁷³ Hewison, 1976, 57 & 134.

⁷⁴ Wilde, “The Decorative Arts,” in O’Brien, 1982, 165.

under its influence to a career of crime.”⁷⁵ Yet, he detached the spiritual effect of beauty from the intellectual intent of art. No work of art—or artist—should be judged by any standard other than purely artistic effect. He said that “any element of morals or implied reference to a standard of good or evil in art is often a sign of a certain incompleteness of vision.”⁷⁶ Specifically addressing Ruskin’s belief that pride in workmanship is enough to define a good work of art, Wilde responded that the result, the effect on the viewer, matters “for those that would enter the serene House of Beauty the question that we ask is not what they had ever meant to do, but what they have done.”⁷⁷ Wilde was not the first of Ruskin’s disciples to uncouple the reverence for beauty from Christianity. William Morris detached Ruskin’s religious imperative and replaced it with a moralistic and political equivalent. Morris’s philosophy was another profound influence on Wilde.

William Morris

In 1881, William Morris wrote to his wife, Janey, about his first meeting with a new acquaintance: “I must admit that as the devil is painted blacker than he is, so it fares with Oscar Wilde, not but what he is an ass, but he certainly is and clever, too.”⁷⁸ Faint praise from the man who had been the leading force in English design reform for over twenty years. Undoubtedly, the serious and accomplished Morris had little patience for a young dilettante who had insinuated himself into artistic circles by talking rather than doing. For his part, Wilde expressed only deep admiration for Morris, praising both his poetry and decorative arts in his lectures. Wilde did not have a close personal relationship with Morris,

⁷⁵ Wilde, “The Decorative Arts,” in O’Brien, 1982, 158.

⁷⁶ Wilde, “The English Renaissance,” in *Essay and Lectures*, 1909, 142.

⁷⁷ Wilde, “L’Envoi,” in *Art and Decoration*, 1920, 122.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Zelda Austen, “The Grasshopper and the Ant: Oscar Wilde and William Morris in the Eighties,” *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 4 (November 1983), 97.

although he apparently orbited in his outer circle. In 1881, perhaps shortly after meeting her father, Wilde sent a charming note to May Morris with the autographs of actors Henry Irving, Ellen Terry and Edwin Booth.⁷⁹ In later years he even appeared at one of Morris's Hammersmith Socialist League meetings "wearing a large dahlia."⁸⁰

Both men studied under John Ruskin at Oxford, twenty years apart. Morris often expressed Ruskin's philosophy in his words and business practice. Wilde, in turn, borrowed heavily from Morris's lectures, expounding particularly on his belief in the reforming quality of art in everyday life. Coincidentally, five of Morris's lectures were published as *Hopes and Fears for Art* in Boston in 1882 during Wilde's tour. Wilde clearly knew these texts well before he arrived in New York. He quoted some of Morris's words, without attribution, quite directly. By the late 1870s, Morris's belief in socialism was strengthening and came through in his artistic rhetoric. Wilde echoed some of those themes, but he was never strongly political and championed the power of the individual to a degree that Morris would not find acceptable.

The best summary of William Morris's artistic philosophy is his own: "follow nature, study antiquity, make your own art, and do not steal it."⁸¹ Like Ruskin, Morris believed that labor that was not free, creative and honest was wrong. He did not see the problem as labor itself, but the dull labor and pointless toil of the modern factory worker who could not express his own creativity. As he saw it, even the medieval craftsman who pounded an anvil was probably content in his work because he had free will. Morris believed that Gothic craftsmen would put as much effort into an ordinary chair as a royal throne.⁸² He also echoed Ruskin

⁷⁹ Hart-Davis, 2000, 110.

⁸⁰ Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for our Time*, (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1994), 522.

⁸¹ William Morris, "The Art of the People," in *Hopes and Fears for Art*, (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1882), 39.

⁸² Morris, "The Art of People," 1882, 56.

when he said that design should be based in nature and in the past. He did not think that contemporary art could be separated from history; designers were necessarily influenced by the past regardless of their striving for originality.⁸³ Likewise, nature was fundamental to design. He stated that “everything made by man’s hands has a form, which must be either beautiful or ugly; beautiful if it is in accord with Nature, and helps her; ugly if it is discordant with Nature, and thwarts her.” Although evidently drawn from Ruskin, Morris’s rhetoric reflects his own views in two important ways: design and social reform. Morris brought Ruskin closer to the common man through practical application. Wilde borrowed that tone in order to make his lectures more pragmatic and accessible to his audience.

Morris was adamant that dreary modern surroundings affected the ability of men and women to appreciate and even recognize beauty, saying “how can I ask working men passing up and down these hideous streets day by day to care about beauty?”⁸⁴ As if the streets weren’t bad enough, the domestic environment offered no respite. He told his audience that “though many of us love architecture dearly, and believe that it helps the healthiness both of body and soul to live among beautiful things, we of the big towns are mostly compelled to live in houses which have become a by-word of contempt for their ugliness and inconvenience.”⁸⁵ His solution to such a dreary situation: art and the craftsman. The craftsman by making beautiful art accomplishes two of Morris’ objectives. He produced objects that improved other people’s lives while satisfying his own creative needs. As Morris puts it, ‘to give people pleasure in the things they must perforce use, that is one great office

⁸³ Morris, “The Lesser Arts,” 1882, 7.

⁸⁴ Morris, “The Lesser Arts,” 1882, 20.

⁸⁵ Morris, “The Art of People,” 1882, 53.

of decoration; to give people pleasure in the things they must perforce make, that is the other use of it.”⁸⁶

Wilde took Morris’s reform message across the Atlantic and customized it to his audience. He found modern American commercial surroundings depressing and antithetical to art, saying “the somber dress of men and women, the meaningless and barren architecture, the vulgar and glaring advertisements that desecrate not merely your eye and ear, but every rock and river and hill that I have seen yet in America.”⁸⁷ Wilde advised his audience that a new artistic movement started with transforming that environment in order to inspire the artist. “Give then, as I said, to your workmen of today the bright and noble surroundings that you can yourself create. Stately and simple architecture for your cities, bright and simple dress for your men and women; those are the conditions of a real artistic movement. For the artist is not concerned primarily with any theory of life but with life itself, with the joy and loveliness that should come daily on eye and ear for a beautiful external world.”⁸⁸ Quoting Morris quite directly, Wilde told his audience that the spirit of this movement will improve maker and user: “We want to see that you have nothing in your houses that has not been a joy to the man who made it, and is not a joy to those that use it.”⁸⁹

Even from his first lecture, Wilde recognized that design reform was both Morris’s genius—calling him “a master of all exquisite design and of all spiritual vision”—and his fundamental contribution to aesthetic improvement in the period.⁹⁰ Preaching appropriate architecture

⁸⁶ Morris, “The Lesser Arts,” 1882, 4.

⁸⁷ Wilde, “The Decorative Arts,” in O’Brien, 1982, 156.

⁸⁸ Wilde, “Art and the Handicraftsman” in *Essays and Lectures*, 1909, 178.

⁸⁹ Wilde, “Art and the Handicraftsman” in *Essays and Lectures*, 1909, 190.

⁹⁰ Wilde, “The English Renaissance,” in *Essay and Lectures*, 1909, 122.

and nature-inspired painting was fine, but as Wilde illustrated in later, more popular, lectures, real reform came when individual lives are affected. For Morris, the everyday object was the foundation of a newly beautified existence. Wilde told his audience that Morris had succeeded in setting a new precedent, telling them “hence the enormous importance given to the decorative arts in our English Renaissance; hence all that marvel of design that comes from the hand of Edward Burne-Jones, all that weaving of tapestry and staining of glass, that beautiful working in clay and metal and wood which we owe to William Morris, the greatest handicraftsman we have had in England since the fourteenth century.”⁹¹ (Figure 4)

In his “The Beauty of Life” lecture, Morris quoted his golden rule: “Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful.”⁹² Paraphrasing slightly, Wilde used the same golden rule: “Have nothing in your houses that is not useful or beautiful.”⁹³ Unlike Ruskin who believed nothing practical should be decorated, Morris and Wilde believed beautiful objects were essential to life.⁹⁴ Both believed that modern manufacturing techniques churned out abundant, cheap and ugly household goods. The buying public was ignorant of the “shamwork” that they were forced to buy because they were unaware of an alternative.⁹⁵ They admonished craftsmen to make, and homeowners to buy, simple, beautifully-designed, well-made objects, and in doing so, to transform their homes with tasteful, healthful surroundings. Using his beloved Greeks as an example, Wilde said that a simple Grecian water jug was more beautiful and valuable than any modern silver

⁹¹ Wilde, “The English Renaissance,” in *Essay and Lectures*, 1909, 146.

⁹² Morris, “The Beauty of Life,” 1882, 107-108.

⁹³ Wilde, “The Decorative Arts,” in O’Brien, 1982, 166.

⁹⁴ Ruskin, “The Lamp of Beauty,” in *Complete Works*, n.d., 115.

⁹⁵ Morris, “The Lesser Arts,” 1882, 29-30 and Wilde, “The Decorative Arts,” in O’Brien, 1982, 153.

centerpiece.⁹⁶ Wilde advised his audience not to be satisfied with unornamented objects just because they are honestly made. In his view, “nothing that is made is too trivial or too poor for art to ennoble, for genius can glorify stone, metal, and wood by the manner in which these simple materials are fashioned and shaped.”⁹⁷

Not surprisingly for Ruskin’s disciples, Morris and Wilde preached design reform with a tone of salvation. If Ruskin’s salvation was tinged with religion, Morris’s motivation was steeped in the political redemption of socialism, while Wilde remained secular, religiously and politically. Morris stated his view quite succinctly, “I cannot forget that, in my mind, it is not possible to dissociate art from morality, politics, and religion.”⁹⁸ Throughout his lectures, Morris demonstrated a palpable concern for elitism. He believed that since the Renaissance, political changes had eroded social and economic privilege, yet the opposite had occurred with art.⁹⁹ As he saw it, the living conditions of the working classes separated them from beauty; the practice of art “must be mainly kept in the hands of a few highly cultivated men, who can go often to beautiful places, whose education enables them, in the contemplation of past glories of the world, to shut out from their view the everyday squalor that the most of men move in.”¹⁰⁰ In Morris’s ideal world, every man would have a share in art. They would live in beautiful, simple surroundings, and they would reap benefits as worker and homeowner. He believed that there are two virtues necessary to “sowing the seed of an art which is to be made by the people and for the people, as a happiness to the maker and the

⁹⁶ Wilde, “The House Beautiful,” in O’Brien, 1982, 165

⁹⁷ Wilde, “The House Beautiful,” in O’Brien, 1982, 165.

⁹⁸ Morris, “The Art of People,” 1882, 66.

⁹⁹ Morris, “The Beauty of Life,” 1882, 80.

¹⁰⁰ Morris, “The Lesser Arts,” 1882, 34.

user.” Those virtues were honesty and simplicity. In fact, simplicity was a moral as well as an aesthetic imperative, eliminating wasteful, useless luxury from people’s lives.¹⁰¹

Wilde apparently thought his American audience would appreciate Morris’s Lincoln-esque quotation and adapted it accordingly: “the art I speak of will be a democratic art made by the hands of the people and for the benefit of the people, for the real basis of all art is to be found in the application of the beautiful in things common to all and in the cultivation and development of this among the artisans of the day.”¹⁰² Wilde carried through on this theme in his lectures; yet, his rhetoric demonstrated far less concern for elitism and praised the spiritual effect, rather than moral effect, of beauty in everyday life. He told his listeners that “the good we get from art is not what we derive directly, but what improvement is made in us by being accustomed to the sight of all comely and gracious things.”¹⁰³ The benefit was visceral rather than intellectual.

Morris believed that cultivating the proper conditions for production—reverence for the past, inspiration from nature and honest, contented labor—would create a revolution in decorative arts for all. Wilde showed less concern for this great leveling effect. Wilde believed that the artist, one of Morris’s “highly cultivated men,” must be the creator of excellent designs for the craftsman to use. The craftsman might be talented, but he lacked the independent knowledge and inspiration to design works that did not pander to modern

¹⁰¹ Morris, “The Art of People,” 1882, 66-68.

¹⁰² Wilde, “The Decorative Arts,” in O’Brien, 1982, 151-152.

¹⁰³ Wilde, “The Decorative Arts,” in O’Brien, 1982, 161.

tastes. “It is of the utmost importance that he be supplied with the noble productions of original minds so that he may acquire that artistic temperament.”¹⁰⁴

Also in contrast to Morris, Wilde had a strong regard for individuality that trumped politics and morality in the expression of art. While collectively, many people could benefit from the consequences of design reform, individual satisfaction was paramount. “You require a sense of individualism about each man and woman, because that, the very keynote of life, is also the essence of art—a desire on the part of man to express the noblest side of his nature in the noblest way, to show the world how many things he can reverence, love and understand.”¹⁰⁵ In “The House Beautiful,” during which he prescribed specific advice for home decoration, Wilde paradoxically told his audience to exercise their own judgments: “In the question of decoration the first necessity is that any system of art should bear the impress of a distinct individuality; it is difficult to lay down rules as to the decoration of dwellings because every home should wear an individual air in all its furnishings and decorations.” Sameness in decoration was the problem of modern age.¹⁰⁶ Whereas Morris believed life in general required more regulation, Wilde believed it required more freedom of expression within, of course, his prescribed definition of beauty.

The differing views of Morris and Wilde on elitism and morality underscore their fundamental distinction: Morris despised Aestheticism. He saw Wilde and his intellectual colleagues contributing to an elitist stratification of art, separating it from the common man and reserving it for the “chosen few.”

¹⁰⁴ Wilde, “The Decorative Arts,” in O’Brien, 1982, 152.

¹⁰⁵ Wilde, “The Decorative Arts,” in O’Brien, 1982, 159.

¹⁰⁶ Wilde, “The House Beautiful,” in O’Brien, 1982, 166.

This would be an art cultivated professedly by a few, and for a few, who would consider it necessary—a duty, if they could admit duties—to despise the common herd, to hold themselves aloof from all that the world has been struggling for from the first, to guard carefully every approach to their place of art. It would be a pity to waste many words on the prospect of such a school of art as this, which does in a way, theoretically at least, exist at present, and has for its watchword a piece of slang that does not mean the harmless thing it seems to mean—art for art’s sake. Its fore-doomed end must be, that art at last will seem too delicate a thing for even the hands of the initiated to touch; and the initiated must at last sit still and do nothing—to the grief of no one.¹⁰⁷

Considering this unequivocal condemnation, it is ironic that Wilde subsequently professed so much of Morris’s morally-based reform message to his North American audiences. Wilde could be accused of cynically repeating Morris’s art and labor philosophy purely for convenience’s sake. Yet, Wilde’s blend of production prescriptions with aesthetic sensibility was, in reality, a separate direction for design reform in the 1870s and 1880s, a fact Morris recognized much to his chagrin. Wilde told his audience that, indeed, the craftsman’s skill mattered, but, universally, beautiful art mattered more. Using a painting as his example, he said that “a picture is primarily a flat surface colored to produce a delightful effect upon the beholder, and if it fails of that, it is surely a bad picture. The aim of all art is simply to make life more joyous.”¹⁰⁸

Despite Morris’s professed opposition, Wilde remained an admirer of his work and philosophy. In 1891, Morris sent Wilde an inscribed copy of *The Roots of the Mountain*. In his effusive reply, Wilde told Morris that he had loved his work since boyhood, feeling that “your work comes from the sheer delight of making beautiful things: that no alien motive ever interests you.”¹⁰⁹ Such cordiality and respect would not mark the relationship of Wilde with another friend and mentor, James McNeill Whistler.

¹⁰⁷ Morris, “The Art of People,” 1882, 53-4.

¹⁰⁸ Wilde, “The House Beautiful,” in O’Brien, 1982, 170.

¹⁰⁹ Hart-Davis, 2000, 476.

The Aesthetes: Whistler and Pater

When Oscar Wilde declared in *Rose Leaf and Apple Leaf* that a younger school had declared its fidelity to “art for art’s sake,” two of the leaders of this school were Walter Pater and James McNeill Whistler. Wilde’s intriguing relationship with Whistler is documented in the affectionate, yet fractious, tone of their letters, at least in its early years. Eventually the friendship would become strained due to Whistler’s combative nature and his resentment towards Wilde seemingly unwarranted fame, fame for which Whistler believed he deserved the credit.¹¹⁰

Wilde met Whistler in early 1877. The artist was a member of the Aesthetic cohort surrounding the Grosvenor Gallery where Wilde debuted in his cello-shaped coat in April of that year.¹¹¹ By 1879, they would be neighbors on Tite Street, Chelsea, where Wilde lived in an E.W. Godwin-designed house with artist Frank Miles, across the street from Whistler’s Godwin-designed White House.¹¹² In North America, Wilde praised Whistler’s work in his lectures and interviews, and he made sure that Whistler knew about the public relations effort. With a self-sacrificing tone, he wrote, “You dear good-for-nothing old Dry-point! Why do you not write to me? Even an insult would be pleasant, and here am I lecturing on you, see penny rag enclosed, and rousing the rage of all the American artists by so doing.”¹¹³

While Whistler’s friendship, and possibly his approval, obviously mattered to Wilde, his influence on Wilde’s rhetoric and aesthetic development is difficult to pinpoint. Leading up

¹¹⁰ Weintraub, 1988, 295-6.

¹¹¹ Ellman, 1988, 78.

¹¹² Susan Weber Soros, “E.W. Godwin and Interior Design,” in *E.W. Godwin: Aesthetic Movement Architect and Designer*, ed. by Susan Weber Soros, (New York: Bard Graduate Center for the Studies in Decorative Arts, 1999), 207 & 211.

¹¹³ Hart-Davis, 2000, 175.

to 1882, there is little to document Whistler's views on art and aestheticism apart from the visual evidence of his paintings. In an article published in *The World* in 1878, he explained his unusual nomenclature: nocturne, arrangement and harmony. (Figure 5) He wanted to divorce his paintings from pictorial strictures and lamented the fact that the "vast majority of English folk cannot and will not consider a picture, apart from a story which it may be supposed to tell." He combined colors like musical notes to create a complete score, and like a musical score, his painting did not have a subject matter. When he used black to represent a figure, he cared "nothing for the past, present or future of the black figure, placed there because the black was wanted at the spot."¹¹⁴ Later that year, Whistler contradicted himself during his contentious lawsuit against John Ruskin. He testified that "nocturne" and "arrangement" did not connect painting to music, the association was purely accidental. He did, however, support his prior contention that, with his obscure titles, he intended to divest "the picture of any outside anecdotal interest which might have been otherwise attached to it. A nocturne is an arrangement of line, form and color first."¹¹⁵

On his first exposure to Whistler's work, Wilde was not a convert, and in fact, viewed it rather conservatively. In his review of the Grosvenor Gallery opening in the *Dublin University Magazine*, he called Whistler the "Great Dark Master" and noted that his pictures were already much maligned. Wilde described *Nocturne in Blue and Silver* and *Nocturne in Black and Gold*, both depictions of rockets bursting in the evening and night skies respectively. In his estimation, "these pictures are certainly worth looking at for about as long as one looks at a real rocket, that is, somewhat less than a quarter of a minute." He admired Whistler's portrait

¹¹⁴ James McNeill Whistler, *Whistler on Art: Selected Letters and Writings*, ed. by Nigel Thorpe, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 51-52.

¹¹⁵ Linda Merrill, *A Pot of Paint: Aesthetics on Trial in Whistler vs. Ruskin*, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 144.

of Henry Irving—the figure was “ridiculously like the original”—yet tweaked the painter for his title, saying *Arrangement in Black No. 3* was “apparently some pseudonym for our greatest living artist.” He saved his praise for Whistler’s most conventional painting, a portrait of Thomas Carlyle, which Wilde said showed Whistler “to be an artist of very great power” when he liked.¹¹⁶ The developing aesthete did not yet recognize the radical statement that Whistler’s nocturnes made. By the time he reached America, however, he would admonish his audience to learn its mastery of color from Whistler.

Wilde drew on Whistler’s influence in two other Aesthetic fundamentals: *synaesthesia* and *Japonisme*. *Synaesthesia* was a belief among poets and visual artists that all arts shared the compositional nature of music; that a poem or an object is constructed from notes, tones and harmonies. Although Whistler seemed unconvinced by his own musical metaphors, Wilde did speak of the synthesis between visual arts and music, as did other artists he admired such as Charles Baudelaire, Algernon Swinburne and E.W. Godwin. He told his audience to decorate their rooms with harmony: “Colors resemble musical notes; a single false color or false note destroys the whole. Therefore, in decorating a room one keynote of color should predominate; it must be decided beforehand what scheme of color is desired and have all else adapted to it, like the answering calls in a symphony of music; otherwise your room will be a museum of colors.” Coincidentally, he immediately praised Whistler’s mastery of color in the Peacock Room decoration.¹¹⁷ A harmonized design was equally important. “From a good piece of design you can take away nothing, nor can you add

¹¹⁶ Oscar Wilde, “The Grosvenor Gallery,” *Dublin University Magazine* 90 (July 1877), 124-125.

¹¹⁷ Wilde, “The House Beautiful,” in O’Brien, 1982, 169.

anything,” every part is as important to “the whole effect as a note or chord of music is for a sonata of Beethoven.”¹¹⁸

Along with Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Godwin, Whistler was an early adopter of the blue and white china craze and incorporated Asian elements into his painting and decoration, helping to launch the *Japonisme* trend. At the same time that he was living up to his blue and white china, Wilde was mostly silent about Japanese ornament in his lectures. In his first lecture, he praised the simplicity of Asian design where “with a simple spray of leaves and a bird in flight a Japanese artist will give you the impression that he has completely covered with lovely design the reed fan or lacquer cabinet at which he is working.”¹¹⁹ In his more pragmatic lecture, “The House Beautiful”, he specifically recommended Japanese plates in lieu of pictures and Japanese matting as appropriate for covering floors and walls.¹²⁰

Although tentative in 1882, this foray into Asian style foreshadowed his personal taste in the coming years.

It was an unprepossessing college don, not the flamboyant Whistler, who had a greater impact on Wilde’s developing aestheticism. When Wilde matriculated at Magdalen College in 1874, he was soon enchanted by Walter Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, which Pater had published the preceding year. Wilde would refer to the tome throughout his life, as “the golden book of spirit and sense, the holy writ of beauty.”¹²¹ Wilde did not attend Pater’s lectures during his Oxford years; however, they developed a friendship in 1877 after Wilde

¹¹⁸ Wilde, “The English Renaissance,” in *Essay and Lectures*, 1909, 180.

¹¹⁹ Wilde, “The English Renaissance,” in *Essay and Lectures*, 1909, 181.

¹²⁰ Wilde, “The House Beautiful,” in O’Brien, 1982, 171 & 174.

¹²¹ Oscar Wilde, “Mr. Pater’s Last Volume,” in *The Artist as Critic*, ed. by Richard Ellman, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.), 230.

sent his Grosvenor Gallery exhibition review to Pater for his comments.¹²² Wilde was so pleased with Pater's response that he copied it out and sent it to his friends. Pater wrote him, "The article shows that you possess some beautiful, and, for your age, quite exceptionally cultivated tastes: and a considerable knowledge too of many beautiful things. I hope you will write a great deal in time to come."¹²³ Pater recognized the nascent aesthete in Wilde.

From Pater's "golden book," Wilde learned to appreciate art as a purely sensuous experience. In *The Renaissance*, Pater preached a critical approach to art based in emotional reaction, not intellectual analysis. He believed that art produced pleasurable sensations that added up to an impression of beauty. In order to define the beauty of an object, the critic must discern the effect on the senses. "The aesthetic critic then regards all the objects with which he has to do, all works of art, and the fairer forms of nature and human life, as powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations each of a more or less peculiar or unique kind."¹²⁴ For Pater, life was, or should be, a complete sensory experience of seeing, touching and gathering impressions. In his exuberant conclusion, he encouraged his reader to seek passion, "only be sure it is passion—that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake, has most. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake."¹²⁵

Wilde did not transmit Pater's unadulterated, metaphysical message to his North American audiences. He used his art and decoration lectures to create a *via media* between Morris's arts

¹²² Ellman, 1988, 83-4.

¹²³ Hart-Davis, 2000, 59.

¹²⁴ Pater, 1917, ix.

¹²⁵ Pater, 1917, 238.

and crafts sensibility and Pater's aesthetic sensuality. Wilde interspersed his lectures with elements of Pater's philosophy, particularly when speaking of the emotional effects of color. He reduced the definition of painting to "primarily a flat surface colored to produce a delightful effect upon the beholder." He continued on the theme: "You should have such men as Whistler among you to teach you the beauty and joy of color. When he paints a picture, he paints by reference not to the subject, which is merely intellectual, but to color."

¹²⁶ By mentioning Whistler, Wilde illustrated a void in Pater's work: the artist or craftsman. Art does not simply "come to you;" the human creative process is integral. Wilde devoted significant portions of his lectures to the education, freedom, and spirit of the craftsman and the importance of the artist in disseminating beauty so that the beholder could reap its rewards.

Unlike Ruskin and Morris, Pater was historically ecumenical. He told the critic to recognize beauty wherever it exists and in whatever form it appears. He believed that no historical period was superior to another and that geniuses from all ages produced brilliant art.¹²⁷

Ruskin would have been particularly vexed by Pater's admiration for the early Renaissance. He admired "its spirit of rebellion and revolt against the moral and religious ideas of the time. In their search after the pleasures of the senses and the imagination, in their care for beauty, in their worship of the body, people were impelled beyond the bounds of the Christian ideal."¹²⁸ In those words, he defined the decadence that Ruskin deemed the ruination of the Gothic. Pater's position was implicit in Wilde's secularism. In telling his audience to derive inspiration from old objects and artisans, Wilde is rarely specific,

¹²⁶ Wilde, "The House Beautiful," in O'Brien, 1982, 170.

¹²⁷ Pater, 1917, x.

¹²⁸ Pater, 1917, 24.

occasionally referring to the Greeks or the medieval, again as if splitting a difference between Ruskin/Morris and Pater. Pater's universality also underpinned Wilde's tolerance—and that of the Aesthetic Movement in general—for international cultures and styles mixed with domestic objects. As long as it added beauty, Islamic, Chinese or Japanese art belonged in the artistic home.

As previously noted, Wilde separated himself from Morris's socialism with a subtle theme of individualism running through his lectures. Pater shared, and possibly inspired, this belief. In Pater's view, each person saw an object uniquely, apprehending its qualities and impressions based on individual personality and experience. Any commonality in perception was a fault. "In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits for: after all, habit is relative to a stereotypical world, and meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations, seem alike."¹²⁹ Once again, Pater is merely concerned with the relationship of the viewer to the object. Wilde recognized, by contrast, the power of the individual in the creative process, both in producing objects and in combining those objects to adorn interior spaces. In order to assist his audiences in creating beautiful interiors, he turned to the burgeoning taste advice industry.

The Taste Advisors

By March 1882, Wilde's lecture tour was proceeding apace and he anticipated returning to several cities for a second lecture. He admitted that he needed some assistance in order to get ready. He wrote to his manager, Colonel W.F. Morse, "The tour is working very well, and the big towns great successes. The new lecture is very brilliant. I will have to write a third for Chicago, which will be a bore. Please get me in New York *Art in the House* by Loftie

¹²⁹ Pater, 1917, 235-236.

(Macmillan) and *The Art of Dress* by Mrs. Haweis and send them to me.”¹³⁰ He borrowed from these taste advisors to differing degrees but found in their works some of his more prosaic and pragmatic recommendations.

In reality, Wilde borrowed little directly from W.J. Loftie or Charles Eastlake, although his design reform message jibed with their themes of simplicity, decoration with beautiful objects and a need to educate the public about art and beauty. In the case of Eastlake, Wilde actually disagreed with the furniture designer’s Gothic revival solution to over-ornamented homes. Wilde told his audience, in lieu of Gothic, “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: it is economical, substantial, and enduring, and carries out Mr. Eastlake’s idea of showing the work of the craftsman. However, it is a little bare and cold, has no delicate lines, and does not look like refined work for refined people; Eastlake furniture is Gothic without the joyous color of the Gothic.” Wilde recommended the furniture that he believed was refined and delicate: Queen Anne.¹³¹

In W.J. Loftie, Wilde found a similar spirit who made the simple, beautiful object central to tasteful decoration. Loftie summarized his philosophy in the monumental title of his 1876 book: *A Plea for Art in the House with Special Reference to the Economy of Collecting Works of Art, and the Importance of Taste in Education and Morals*. His central premise: collecting and decorating with fine objects promised a beautiful home and future value. Loftie took the concept of “house beautiful” to a higher level than many other design reformers, implying that good taste was a religious duty. He wrote that a “working view of Christianity would include an

¹³⁰ Hart-Davis, 2000, 146.

¹³¹ Wilde, “The House Beautiful,” in O’Brien, 1982, 172.

ideal of heaven as home, and help us to do something while we can to establish and increase neatness and order beauty and sweetness, music and art.”¹³² Wilde did not quite place “beautiffulness” next to Godliness, but he did borrow one of Loftie’s more poetic pleas for simplicity. Loftie wrote, “An old Greek vase, used for carrying water from the well, without any ornament or pattern on it of any kind is more beautiful to look at than anything we can make now, and it is the same with furniture.”¹³³ Likewise, in America, Wilde advised his listeners to adopt simple forms made from basic materials, suggesting “the most valuable curio in an art museum is, perhaps, a little urn out of which a Greek girl drew water from a well.”¹³⁴

Early in his tour, Wilde requested that Colonel Morse contact a costumier for new coats, describing his desire: “They should be beautiful; tight velvet doublet, with large flowered sleeves and little ruffs of cambric coming up under collar.” He was sure the costume shop would understand, “sort of Francis I dress; only knee-breeches instead of long hose.”¹³⁵ Never one to let irony distract from his message, Wilde stood in front of his audiences, like a Renaissance king, and preached about dress reform. His concern for beautiful art and surroundings extended to the sartorial norms of the Victorian age. He believed everyday costume was somber, cumbersome and unhealthful. How could an artist possibly be inspired to sculpt a beautiful statue from such dreadful modern forms? “To see the statues of our departed statesmen in marble frock-coats and bronze, double-breasted waistcoats adds a

¹³² W.J. Loftie, *A Plea for Art in the House with Special Reference to the Economy of Collecting Works of Art, and the Importance of Taste in Education and Morals*, (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1978), 90.

¹³³ Loftie, 1978, 27.

¹³⁴ Wilde, “The House Beautiful,” in O’Brien, 1982, 166.

¹³⁵ Hart-Davis, 2000, 141.

new horror to death.”¹³⁶ Furthermore, how could the craftsman make beautiful objects while walking to work among dreary costumes? “The somber dress of the age is robbing life of its beauty and is ruinous to art.”¹³⁷ In fact, he felt so strongly about modern costume that, throughout the 1880s, he treated dress reform as a campaign, enlisting his wife Constance as his experimental mannequin and promoting it as editor of *The Woman’s World* journal. In America, however, he would rely on the theories of Mary Eliza Haweis as a basis for his advice. He not only drew on her rules for proper dress, he also expressed notions of design and moral beauty that mirror her rhetoric.

Mary Eliza Haweis considered herself an “Art-Protestant,” one of the few people like William Morris, Owen Jones and Charles Eastlake who recognized the need for art reformation. In *The Art of Dress*, and in a similar, earlier book, *The Art of Beauty*, she espoused many of the same philosophies as the other Art-Protestants: design simplicity, suspicion of machine-made goods, and the need for art schools. She applied those tenets to costume by, for example, twisting Morris’s words slightly, saying “probably nothing that is not useful is in any high sense beautiful.” In dress, useless ornament was pointless and ungraceful.¹³⁸ Like other Art-Protestants, she believed that the past was appropriate inspiration for better costume, as it is in furniture and decoration. In *The Art of Dress*, she catalogued historical styles, pointing to appropriate and inappropriate parallels for contemporary English dress. Her main concerns were that clothing fit naturally over the body and express the “character of the wearer.”¹³⁹ Wilde also preached naturally fitting clothing made from joyous colors.

¹³⁶ Wilde, “The Decorative Arts,” in O’Brien, 1982, 157.

¹³⁷ Wilde, “The Decorative Arts,” in O’Brien, 1982, 156.

¹³⁸ Mary Eliza Haweis, *The Art of Beauty*, (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1978), 28.

¹³⁹ Mary Eliza Haweis, *The Art of Dress*, (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1978), 32.

Like Haweis, he absolutely deplored stays as unnatural and tortuous. “Nothing is beautiful, such as tight corsets, which is destructive of health; all dress follows out the line of the figure—it should be free to move about in, showing the figure.”¹⁴⁰ He obviously quoted from Haweis’s survey of historical styles, highlighting the periods—classical Greece, of course—in which he believed that people wore harmonious and artistic costume. In his later lectures, he added a contemporary example that Haweis would not imagine. Turning to men’s clothing he boldly stated that “the only well-dressed men I have seen in America were the miners of the Rocky Mountains.” Although they dressed for practicality and comfort, he called their flowing cloaks “the most beautiful piece of drapery ever invented.” He hoped that, after attaining their fortunes, the miners would return to the East to purge “the abominations of modern fashionable attire.”¹⁴¹ Even he must have realized that this was wishful thinking.

Beyond dress reform, two other concepts in Wilde’s lectures strongly parallel Haweis’s discussion of beauty and art. They are not part of the work of Ruskin, Morris or Pater, thus Wilde plausibly culled them from her books. First, Haweis advocated the artist as designer, and not just any artist, the best that England had to offer. Using Holbein as the example of a court painter who also decorated the palace, she thought it ridiculous that the nineteenth century scoffed at the “notion of such men as Watts, Leighton, or Millais designing regularly for goldsmiths and weavers.” She praised Whistler and Walter Crane for their decorative endeavors. She said that England would never rank as an aesthetic nation if “lower orders” of designers designed household goods.¹⁴² Wilde clearly concurred and was unconcerned

¹⁴⁰ Wilde, “The House Beautiful,” in O’Brien, 1982, 178.

¹⁴¹ Wilde, “The House Beautiful,” in O’Brien, 1982, 179-180.

¹⁴² Haweis, *The Art of Beauty*, 1978, 208-9.

about the elitism of dividing design from craftsmanship. He said that “you cannot get good work done unless the handicraftsman is furnished with rational and beautiful designs; if you have commonplace design, you must have commonplace workmen.”¹⁴³ Although he praised Whistler’s interior decoration, he was not as specific about the artists who should be designing. In fact, he would never consider William Morris in the “lower orders” of designer, although by Haweis’s definition, he did not rank in the great artists of the day.

Haweis also wrote eloquently about the morality of beauty in terms that are very similar to Wilde. Both Haweis and Wilde differentiated the morality of beauty from the morality of art. Beauty was a fundamental force that had the power to impact and improve lives; it was not the didactic, sermonizing art of Ruskin. Haweis wrote that beauty compelled virtue, saying “the love of beauty in all its forms is an instinct so universal that we feel it must be in a sense divine, and the influence of beauty, not abused, has been seen in all ages to be for good not harm.”¹⁴⁴ Wilde believed that love of beauty was even more elemental, a human necessity. “Few people will deny that they are doing injury to themselves and their children by living outside the beauty of life, which we call art, for art is no mere accident of existence which men may take or leave, but a very necessity of human life, if we are to live as nature intended us to live, that is, unless we are content to be something less than men.”¹⁴⁵ The words of Pater echoed in both writers. It was the aesthetic experience of beautiful art, the spiritual not intellectual reaction, that their readers and listeners must seek. Yet while Pater’s art produced pleasurable sensations, Wilde and Haweis believed it went beyond to enhance a satisfying life.

¹⁴³ Wilde, “The Decorative Arts,” in O’Brien, 1982, 152.

¹⁴⁴ Haweis, *The Art of Dress*, 1978, 11.

¹⁴⁵ Wilde, “The Decorative Arts,” in O’Brien, 1982, 151.

Wilde's lectures were not merely Ruskin and water; they included Wilde's obviously deep understanding of William Morris and Walter Pater, his growing empathy for Whistler's maverick style and his appreciation of popular writers such as Charles Eastlake and Mary Eliza Haweis. Does the fact the Wilde mixed bits of these sources together and delivered his own concoction mean that he was derivative? Arguably so, but such criticism would be simplistic. Viewed from a different perspective, the lectures represent Wilde's education, his assimilation of all that he had experienced and learned from his first days at Oxford through his early London years. They begin to reveal Wilde's thoughts on morality, ideal beauty and individualism that marked his departure from mentors like Ruskin. He borrowed from these men and women, but was not as dogmatic as any of them. He saw the shades of grey that appeared as he laid each philosophy over the other. He understood Ruskin's advocacy of nature's imitation but, like Morris, he could eliminate its religious overtones. He recognized Pater's inadequate treatment of the artist, and saw no contradiction in blending Morris's art and labor prescriptions with Pater's visceral aestheticism. The resulting mixture was pure Wilde. Furthermore, because he reveled in the irony of preaching about taste while dressed in ruffled collars and knee breeches, he brought the words and beliefs of all these nineteenth-century thinkers to a wider audience than they would have reached on their own. While many spectators came to see his eccentric costume and sunflowers, it was the content of the lectures that ensured the longevity of the North American tour. And it was the lectures that secured Wilde's role in the intellectual development of a design reform movement.

By the end of 1882, Oscar Wilde had covered fifteen thousand miles across the United States and Canada, lecturing to thousands of people from New York to San Francisco, from

New Orleans to Halifax.¹⁴⁶ Towards the end of the tour, Wilde began to betray a desire to go back to his former ambitions. In a letter to American actor Steele Mackaye, he wrote “I long to get back to real literary work, for though my audiences are really most appreciative, I cannot write while flying from one railway to another and from the cast-iron stove of one hotel to its twin horror in the next.”¹⁴⁷ Over the course of the year, Wilde had transformed himself from young poet and society dilettante to the most recognizable spokesman for the Aesthetic Movement. He returned to England and continued writing and lecturing on art and design reform. When he married in 1884, he found that it was his turn to create a “House Beautiful.”

¹⁴⁶ Lloyd Lewis and Henry Justin Smith, *Oscar Wilde Discovers America*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936), 442.

¹⁴⁷ Hart-Davis, 2000, 186.

CHAPTER THREE

WILDE'S HOME: The Aesthetic Architect Meets the Aesthetic Apostle

Oscar Wilde continued his career as lecturer, writer and poet in England, living a comfortable, but far from affluent existence—having spent most of his American earnings on an extended stay in Paris. When he married Constance Lloyd in 1884, the couple used her marriage settlement to fund the decoration of a new, speculatively-built house in London's Chelsea neighborhood. It was Wilde's moment to practice what he had been preaching. Even as he negotiated a lease on a terraced home at no. 16 Tite Street, he understood that he and Constance were not typical newlyweds setting up home. He had a reputation to uphold. At first, he approached Whistler for assistance, but his sometime friend challenged him instead, replying, "no, Oscar, you have been lecturing to us about the House Beautiful; now is your chance to show us one."¹⁴⁸ So he turned instead to Edward W. Godwin. It would be a partnership of two of Aestheticism's best known proponents: the talker and the practitioner. In fact, if one could compare the movement to a product, then Wilde was its marketer and Godwin was its manufacturer. Over many months, legal disputes with two contractors and large expenditures, Wilde and Godwin created their collective vision of the modern, artistic home.

E.W. Godwin was a Victorian polymath: architect, interior decorator, furniture designer, and theatre designer. Beginning his career as a Gothic Revival architect in the 1860s, Godwin became heavily influenced by Japanese design and Queen Anne architects such as Richard Norman Shaw and soon moved toward greater simplicity in his architecture and furniture. By the 1870s, he was advocating a less-is-more style for interior furnishings and

¹⁴⁸ Ellman, 1988, 248.

decoration and was designing his iconic ebonized furniture. His design work and buildings would be influential for the next generation of architect-designers, such as A.H. Mackmurdo and C.R. Mackintosh, and his furniture has been praised for its proto-modern tendencies.¹⁴⁹ He is less recognized for his writing in an age when many self-proclaimed advisors arose to instruct the middle class on the artistically beautiful house. Godwin did write prolifically in the 1870s and became the editor of the *British Architect and Northern Engineer* in 1878.¹⁵⁰ He set himself apart from other pundits by directing his polemics mainly toward the trade, and by roundly criticizing "the presuming amateur and inexperienced artist, who in these latter days have developed the knack of posing as apostles of domestic art, endeavoring by noise and crowd to fill the place of those whose works and experience are warranty of their judgment."¹⁵¹ His writings ranged from high philosophy of Greek refinement and musical metaphors to prosaic discussions of green diaper-pattern paper versus yellow paint. While not as elegant as Wilde—whom he might have categorized as a posing apostle—and often more petulant, he eloquently expounded key philosophies of the Aesthetic Movement: Hellenistic spirit, Japanese-inspired decoration, healthful environments, and beauty as a powerful, improving cultural force.

Individually, Godwin and Wilde worked to spread their message and improve lives.

Collaboratively, they would attempt to realize their design theory within bricks and mortar and prove its value. For Godwin, Wilde's commission was yet another chance to experiment with home interiors. He had completed high profile commissions in the past—Whistler,

¹⁴⁹ Juliet Kinchin, "E.W. Godwin and Modernism," *E.W. Godwin: Aesthetic Movement Architect and Designer*, ed. Susan Weber Soros, (New York: Bard Graduate Center for the Studies in Decorative Arts, 1999) 97.

¹⁵⁰ Juliet Kinchin and Paul Stirton, *Is Mr. Ruskin Living Too Long?* (Oxford: White Cockade Publishing, 2005), 46.

¹⁵¹ E.W. Godwin, "A Manifesto for Art," quoted in Kinchin, 2005, 46.

most notably—so he was undaunted by having the apostle of Aestheticism as a client. In fact, Wilde’s correspondence indicates that he was more than willing to defer to most of Godwin’s instructions and provide an unobstructed work space for Godwin’s reform theories. For Wilde, his home was the moment to turn both his rhetoric and, to a certain extent, himself into reality. He had to prove to his circle of artistic and literary elites that he could create the kind of environment that he had urged on all of his lecture audiences. Furthermore, with his largely itinerant, bachelor life now ended, he could ensconce himself and his family in the beautifully-constructed existence that he proclaimed as life’s ultimate goal. Finally, despite his practiced rhetoric, he probably could not have accomplished such a polished and unusual interior without Godwin. At the same moment that many middle-class Victorian interiors contained mahogany tables, stuffed hassocks and fringed tapestry portières, Godwin and Wilde produced an original, modern interior of light, painted walls, built-in furniture and strategically-placed art works. The most radical room was the all-white dining room that would foreshadow the bright, symmetrical rooms of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and ultimately, modernism’s ultra-simplification.

Wilde and Godwin: Aesthetes in Common

Although he never mentions his name or refers to his design work, both thematically and specifically Godwin’s philosophy of art and decoration was obvious in Wilde’s lectures. Was Godwin a mentor to the young Aesthete? The depth of their relationship before the Tite Street commission is unclear; extant letters between them do not appear until 1884. However, Wilde was a part of the circle of artists for whom Godwin was designing houses in 1878 and 1879. Wilde’s London roommate, artist Frank Miles, commissioned Godwin to design his house in 1879. Wilde was also besotted with actress Ellen Terry, Godwin’s lover,

sending her sonnets and hoping she would play the lead in his first play, *Vera or the Nihilists*.¹⁵² A close reading of Godwin's writings alongside Wilde's lectures uncovers obvious parallels. First and foremost, they were consummate Aesthetes. Reading the following quote, it is difficult to discern the writer:

To commit beauty—because we cannot help it, to make for the healthy—as a matter of course; to breathe in an atmosphere where the sunbeam throbs with art, and the rain is woven with sanitation, are, perhaps, possible only in the land of Utopia. We might, however, make for that land, and near it, if we were more in earnest, more thorough; not by way of frowns and long faces, but by that old Japanesy method of taking delight in all that contributes to beauty and health.¹⁵³

It was Godwin. He shared Wilde's belief in beauty as a cultural force that improves lives, educates children, and contributes to a healthful environment. In return, Wilde's ideal beauty sprung from the kind of unified and harmonious art and interiors that Godwin conceived, rather than a *mélange* of styles, media and objects. Like Godwin, he believed that the separation of the artist from the design of interiors and objects created the disgraceful aesthetics of the modern age. Finally, for both men, classicism was a fundamental force in art and architecture that could not be suppressed by prevailing gothicism.

Early in his career as an architect, Godwin designed in the Gothic Revival style, building civic castles like the Northampton and Congleton Town Halls in the 1860s.¹⁵⁴ (Figure 6) Yet, his articles of the 1870s are nearly devoid of the moralizing and historicism usually associated with the medievalist architects. Instead, he praised the order and refinement of Greek architecture, commencing his progression toward design simplicity. He stated that it is “in the endeavor to purify the simplest elements of building, to extract the highest beauty out of an extremely limited repertoire of architectural features, that we trace the

¹⁵² Ellman, 1988, 119.

¹⁵³ E.W. Godwin, *Dress, and its relation to Health and Climate*, (London: William Clowes & Sons, Ltd., 1884), 1.

¹⁵⁴ Aileen Reid, “The Architectural Career of E. W. Godwin,” in Soros, 1999, 140-142.

indescribable refinement which was and is one of the essential characteristics of Greek art.”

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The architect developed his aesthetic style in a systematic and studied manner that saw its ultimate fruition in the houses of Tite Street. He began with experiments within his own residences, describing them in two multi-part series in the *Architect* journal. He explained his dissatisfaction with wallpaper, his experiments with color, the logic of his furniture designs and his desire for simplicity. He wrote all of the articles in the summer of 1876, although the first two looked back on rooms that he inhabited in 1867. Many of his conclusions form the basis of the designs and specifications for Frank Miles's house and studio and the Wildes' home. While it seems unlikely that Wilde read the *Architect* as an Oxford student, he was likely exposed to Godwin's design philosophies while living with Frank Miles and perhaps read his articles at that later date. Regardless of the timing, Wilde easily incorporated Godwin's views into his lectures and, ultimately, into his home's interior.

Godwin discovered his preference for painted walls in his first London lodging, where he experimented with the popular wallpapers of the period. He tried different patterns, layering floral papers over diaper patterns on different levels of the wall in typical Victorian fashion.¹⁵⁶ After changing papers several times, yet still feeling a depressive pall over his dining room, he removed the paper from the upper walls and painted them "creamy white." He stated with satisfaction, "This was a great relief, so great indeed that I congratulated myself on having extirpated my enemy." For decoration, he covered the walls with Japanese-painted crape hangings and Japanese fans, finding the overall effect light and cheerful.¹⁵⁷ By

¹⁵⁵ E. W. Godwin, "Greek Art at the Conference," *Architect* 15 (June 24, 1876), 396.

¹⁵⁶ E.W. Godwin, "My Chambers, and what I did to them, Part 1," *Architect* (July 1, 1876), 4.

¹⁵⁷ E.W. Godwin, "My Chambers, and what I did to them, Part 2," *Architect* (July 8, 1876), 18-19.

the time he moved into a house in Bloomsbury in 1876, he had left heavy wall decoration behind saying, "My painting and papering—the 'decorations' as they are called—have been carried out with a leaning, perhaps in excess, towards lightness, and a simplicity almost amounting to severity."¹⁵⁸

Lightness, with a dose of function, was a key element of Godwin's furniture designs. He was dissatisfied with Victorian furniture on many levels, considering it outmoded, heavy, and unhealthful. He regarded "fluff and dust in rooms as two of the great enemies of life,"¹⁵⁹ therefore he recommended small carpets and lightweight furniture that could be easily moved for cleaning and rearranging. He describes his chairs as "light enough for a child to carry, and strong enough for a child to clamber on," although even he complained that too much of his ebonized furniture could be dark and depressing.¹⁶⁰ His definition of healthfulness extended to atmosphere, often describing a room in terms of the moods that it generated. He said that his dining room with its plain table and simple, circular chairs was "joyous."¹⁶¹ He believed that the white-walled drawing room should be open and simple, because "it is a place to withdraw to in the intervals of the more serious business of life for the sake of wakeful rest."¹⁶² Godwin admitted that some critics might call his bedrooms cheerless, but he believed they must be plain, simple, and easy to clean, and should not contain any "enervating" colors or patterns to disturb one's mood first thing in the morning.¹⁶³ Finally, he praised the simple, utilitarian furniture in the working parts of the

¹⁵⁸ E. W. Godwin, "My House 'in' London, Chapter 1," *Architect* (July 15, 1876), 34.

¹⁵⁹ Godwin, "My Chambers, and what I did to them, Part I," *Architect* (July 1, 1876), 5.

¹⁶⁰ E.W. Godwin, "My House 'in' London, Chapter III – The Dining Room," *Architect* (July 29, 1876), 59 and "My Chambers, and what I did to them, Part II," *Architect* (July 8, 1876), 19.

¹⁶¹ Godwin, "My House 'in' London, Chapter III – The Dining Room," *Architect* (July 29, 1876), 59.

¹⁶² E. W. Godwin, "My House 'in' London, Chapter IV – The Drawing Room," *Architect* (August 5, 1876), 73.

¹⁶³ E.W. Godwin, "My House 'in' London, Chapter V – The Bedrooms," *Architect* (August 12, 1876), 86.

house, such as the plain deal kitchen table with its Windsor chairs. "I am venturesome enough to affirm that the greatest-utility-at-the-least-cost principle is the only sure and certain road to beauty whether in furniture or architecture."¹⁶⁴ The principles of utility and simplicity—the useful and the beautiful—echoed in Godwin's work.

In his American lectures, Wilde expounded many of the art and design philosophies that the two men shared. On a more prosaic level, he also seemed to borrow some of his specific decorating advice from Godwin. Wilde actually spoke little of Asian influences in his lectures relative to its importance in the Aesthetic Movement. However, perhaps taking a cue from Godwin, he recommended Japanese plates in lieu of pictures and Japanese matting as appropriate for covering floors and walls.¹⁶⁵ Although Japan is mentioned sporadically, Wilde's admiration for its design simplicity is explicit in the lectures. In addition, while he never discussed modern ebonized furniture, like Godwin he recommended Queen Anne as a preferred furniture style for its delicacy and symmetry that created beauty and comfort in a room. He recommended bare parquet floors with few rugs and warned against too much embroidery and drapery in a room. He cautioned against owning cut glass—it is "too common and hard"—but rather advocated delicate Venetian-style glass.¹⁶⁶

No. 16 Tite Street, Chelsea

¹⁶⁴ E.W. Godwin, "My House 'in' London, Chapter VI—Tops and Bottoms," *Architect* (August 19, 1876), 100.

¹⁶⁵ Wilde, "The House Beautiful," in O'Brien, 1982, 171, 174.

¹⁶⁶ Wilde, "The House Beautiful," in O'Brien, 1982, 170-177.

“To Oscar Wilde’s weird house, dullish” was the blunt judgment meted out by Marion Sambourne in her diary concerning one of her social engagements.¹⁶⁷ The wife of *Punch* cartoonist Linley Sambourne prided herself on the stereotypical, cluttered, upper-middle-class interior of her 1870s terraced London home in fashionable Kensington. The avant-garde, sparsely decorated house created by the Wildes and E.W. Godwin in bohemian Chelsea was clearly outside the mainstream of even those who considered themselves among the sophisticated elites of the day. The interior was not significantly different from decorative schemes that Godwin created for James McNeill Whistler, for Frank Miles and for his own house. However, the hard-won reputation and social position of Oscar Wilde raised the stakes for this commission. It took Godwin’s vision and punditry beyond the intimate circle of London’s artists. Even Wilde recognized its importance, telling Godwin “the house must be a success.”¹⁶⁸

Godwin had already spent many years working in Wilde’s Chelsea neighborhood. He designed and built White House for his friend Whistler in 1878 on Tite Street. In the spring of 1879, he began plans for a house for portraitist Frank Miles in the same street.¹⁶⁹ At the time, Miles and Wilde shared rooms in 13 Salisbury Street and Wilde was involved in Miles’s plans for his new home and studio.¹⁷⁰ (Figure 7) In a note to Godwin appended to an initial proposal for the interior decoration, Miles stated “*we* have all talked over these proposals and approve.”¹⁷¹ In August 1880 he told Mrs. Alfred Hunt of their move to no. 1 Tite Street:

¹⁶⁷ Shirley Nicholson, *A Victorian Household*, (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishers Limited, 1994), 55.

¹⁶⁸ Wilde to Godwin, December 1884, Oscar Wilde papers, Eccles Bequest, Add. 81690, Manuscript Reading Room, British Library, London, UK.

¹⁶⁹ Susan Weber Soros, “E.W. Godwin and Interior Design,” in Soros, 1999, 207, 211.

¹⁷⁰ Ellman, 1988, 109.

¹⁷¹ Godwin to Miles, May 22, 1879, E.W. Godwin papers, AAD 4/156-1988 to 162-1988, Archive of Art and Design, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK.

“And now I am trying to settle a new house, where Mr. Miles and I are going to live. The address is horrible but the house very pretty.” He complained that their efforts interrupted other duties: “My only excuse is that nowadays the selection of colors and furniture has quite taken the place of the cases of conscience of the middle ages, and usually involves quite as much remorse.”¹⁷²

Godwin clearly saw Frank Miles’s house and studio as a laboratory for his interior decoration philosophies. Furthermore, the design scheme bears many similarities to the appearance of the Wilde home five years later. In the end, Godwin called it “the best thing I ever did.”¹⁷³ In an initial proposal to Miles, dated May 22, 1879, he described what he might call a “harmony of colors,” all coordinated for room use and light exposure and nary a mention of wallpaper:

2nd floor – as to the painting I propose for studio: woodwork an ivory white, walls deeper ivory, ceiling white

Staircase + hall: wood ivory white, walls + ceiling light brown paper color (north light)

1st floor: Drawing room: wood cinnamon, walls + ceiling toned golden yellow (north light)

Your bedroom: wood blue, walls grey blue green, ceiling white

Little bedroom: wood ivory white walls + ceiling pale blue

Bathroom: all white (all noted as south light)

Ground floor – Dining room: wood golden brown walls + ceiling red (north light)

Kitchen + office red dado (?) with rest white¹⁷⁴

Godwin went on to note that he would test the paint colors in each room and make changes after seeing the results. He did open the door for his client’s preference asking “if you have any pet color let me know by return please and we will do our best.” Miles indeed replied with a request for some of the typical Aesthetic Movement colors. “As you make no

¹⁷² Hart-Davis, 2000, 94.

¹⁷³ Quoted in Charlotte Gere and Lesley Hoskins, *The House Beautiful: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetic Interior*, (London: Lund Humphries, 2000), 69.

¹⁷⁴ Godwin to Miles, May 22, 1879, E.W. Godwin papers, AAD 4/156-1988 to 162-1988, Archive of Art and Design, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK.

mention of any of the sage or olive greens or dark egg, I suppose you leave these tones for garniture, hangings, etc.”¹⁷⁵ Miles apparently thought that Godwin’s modern interior was either too sparse or too radical even for his Aesthetic Movement peers to accept.

Two months later in July, Godwin completed an extremely detailed estimate of the furnishings. The document is full of Godwin’s decorative style: sparse spaces, lightweight furniture and Japanese touches. In the studio he specified Chinese floor matting and a plain, stuffed throne made of two mattresses that could be adjusted from a flat surface to a couch with a backrest. The bedrooms contained iron bedsteads, Windsor chairs and Japanese cretonne curtains. Sketches to the side of the estimate detailed the washstand and writing table for one of the bedrooms. The designs are simple, linear, and symmetrical in keeping with the sparse interior. For the kitchen, Godwin wrote an extensive, precise list of the contents including the quantities of flatware, dinner plates, copper kettles, cleaning tools, baking pans, coffee mill and more, down to the one dozen claret glasses to be ordered from Powells (of Whitefriars).¹⁷⁶ He would not go to such lengths to specify the contents of the Wilde home, perhaps in deference to Mrs. Wilde. He gave Constance some discretion to outfit her own home.

No extant renderings of the interior of no. 16 Tite Street expose the final interiors. (Figure 8) Tentative descriptions of the rooms can be gleaned from contracts, letters and visitors’ recollections. Yet it is impossible to ascertain if all of the proposed Godwin designs and colors made it into the finished house. No matter the final reality, the intent of architect and

¹⁷⁵ Godwin to Miles, May 22, 1879, E.W. Godwin papers, AAD 4/156-1988 to 162-1988, Archive of Art and Design, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK.

¹⁷⁶ Estimate: For furnishing certain portions of house + studio belonging to Frank Miles Esq. at Tite Street Chelsea, July 1879, E.W. Godwin papers, AAD 4/131, Archive of Art and Design, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK.

tenant was a living picture of their quintessential Aesthetic home. Their canvas was an ordinary middle-class home of the late nineteenth century. Beyond the ground floor entry hall was a library and the dining room. The first floor contained a double drawing room while the upper two floors contained three bedrooms, a study, and a bathroom.¹⁷⁷ They would mainly paint its interior, eschewing the popular, heavy Morris-style papers, and add some unusual, artistic touches.

Godwin wrote a “memorandum of alterations painters & joiners work to be done at no. 16 Tite Street Chelsea for Oscar Wilde Esq.” in his own hand but did not date it. Presumably he drafted it early in the design process. The first part of the document outlined structural changes such as altering moldings, adding a built-in seat in the dining room and making a pass-through between the kitchen and dining room. In the second part of the document, he detailed the paint schemes for each room, allowing for a credible visualization. On a separate large sheet of paper, he sketched moldings and mantelpieces, marking them with letters that he referenced in the notes.¹⁷⁸

After scratching out several colors, he described the room that would become known for its “whiteness:”

Dining Room: The whole of woodwork to be enamel white to walls in oils enamel white-grey to the height of 5'-6". The rest of the walls + ceilings to be finished in line – which with slight addition of black to give to which a grayish tone. At the top of the dado a band of wood to be fixed as per drawing E + painted enamel white to match rest of woodwork.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ Gere, 2000, 98.

¹⁷⁸ Memorandum of alterations painters & joiners work to be done at no. 16 Tite Street Chelsea for Oscar Wilde Esq., Oscar Wilde papers, Eccles Bequest, Add. 81753, Manuscript Reading Room, British Library, London, UK.

¹⁷⁹ Memorandum of alterations painters & joiners work to be done at no. 16 Tite Street Chelsea for Oscar Wilde Esq., Oscar Wilde papers, Eccles Bequest, Add. 81753, Manuscript Reading Room, British Library, London, UK.

Wilde's son, Vyvyan Holland, who lived in the house until age nine—and whose boyhood memory may not be entirely reliable—recollected the pitfalls of such a pristine environment: “the prevailing note in the dining room was white blending with pale blue and yellow. The walls were white; the Chippendale chairs were painted white and upholstered in white plush, and the carpet, concerning the cleanliness of which we were constantly being admonished, was also white.”¹⁸⁰ In his autobiography, W.B. Yeats recalled a Christmas dinner in the late 1880s in “a dining room all white, chairs, walls, mantelpiece, carpet, except for a diamond-shaped piece of red cloth in the middle of the table under a terra-cotta statuette, and I think a red-shaped lamp hanging.”¹⁸¹ The red lamp, however, does not appear in any other sources.

The library functioned as Wilde's study and was the room in which he did most of his work. Godwin imagined it in warm golden tones:

Library: The walls to the height of 5'-6" to be painted in distemper dark blue, the upper part of walls, cornice + ceiling to be pale gold color. The woodwork throughout to be golden brown (russet). The wall band to be of thin wood as per drawing F painted golden brown.¹⁸²

Apparently Wilde or Godwin removed the blue distemper along the way because Vyvyan described it with pale yellow walls and enameled red woodwork where most of the space was given over to books.¹⁸³ It also contained a “colossal bust of Apollo,” a number of bronzes, a Chinese lantern, a Persian carpet as well as a sheepskin rug, and several easy

¹⁸⁰ Vyvyan Holland, *Son of Oscar Wilde*, (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers Inc., 1999), 42.

¹⁸¹ William Butler Yeats, *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1938), 117.

¹⁸² Memorandum of alterations painters & joiners work to be done at no. 16 Tite Street Chelsea for Oscar Wilde Esq., Oscar Wilde papers, Eccles Bequest, Add. 81753, Manuscript Reading Room, British Library, London, UK.

¹⁸³ V. Holland, 1999, 41.

chairs. Wilde indulged in some Victorian clutter in his study, perhaps to surround himself with his prized possessions if not also seeking artistic inspiration.¹⁸⁴

Godwin then described the two-section drawing room on the first floor:

Drawing room front: Ivory white woodwork, walls distempered flesh pink from skirting. The cornice will be gilded dull flat lemon color gold, the ceiling margin with Japanese leather which will be provided by Mr. Wilde + is to be properly fixed by contractor. The wall band to be molded wood as per sketch painted ivory white

Drawing room back: Distempered pale green ceiling + cornice walls green darker. Fireplace and woodwork painted brown pink.¹⁸⁵

Wilde and Godwin completed rooms that were similar to the descriptions. Yeats vaguely remembered a white drawing room.¹⁸⁶ Vyvyan recalled buttercup yellow walls and a special decorative element: “As a concession to Whistler, who conceived the idea, two large, many-hued Japanese feathers were let into the ceilings.” According to Vyvyan, the back drawing room was his father’s exotic smoking-room, a dark, “awe-inspiring” room covered in textured wallpaper and furnished with “divans, ottomans and Moorish hangings.”¹⁸⁷

According to the bankruptcy catalogue, the room did contain Moorish screens, a Persian mosque lamp and pearl-inlaid olivewood tables, together with Chinese and Japanese decorative elements.¹⁸⁸

Godwin continued through each room of the house including a pink and green bedroom, a dark blue bedroom, and Wilde’s bedroom of “greyish pink-red upper walls over red russet brown.” Next to this notation, Godwin even included a few strokes of watercolor to

¹⁸⁴ A.N.L. Mumby, ed., *Sale Catalogues of Libraries of Eminent Persons, Vol. 1: Poets and Men of Letters*, (London: Mansell, 1971), 385-6.

¹⁸⁵ Oscar Wilde papers, Eccles Bequest, Add. 81753, Manuscript Reading Room, British Library, London, UK.

¹⁸⁶ Yeats, 1938, 117.

¹⁸⁷ V. Holland, 1999, 43-44.

¹⁸⁸ Mumby, 1971, 387.

demonstrate the two colors he recommended.¹⁸⁹ Constance apparently reacted against the modern austerity of the rest of the house, not to mention Godwin's belief in simple bedroom furnishings. Her son describes her bedroom as typically Victorian: stuffed chairs, lace curtains, embroidery, drapery and many book cases.¹⁹⁰ She may have been the consummate Aesthetic wife, but she was independent enough to keep a room of one's own.

Other documents, including a specification sheet for the contractor's work, add little more than prosaic construction details such as polishing and fastening all door hardware, distemping certain sections of walls, painting two versus three coats of paint onto woodwork, and cleaning all of the drains. Godwin's sketches, however, are illuminating and suggest that much of the simple decoration of the home was built in. Scattered across different shapes and sizes of paper—including the backs of other documents—Godwin illustrated architectural details such as the design of crown moldings and picture frames. He even designed one set of frames for three Burne-Jones drawings and one set for three Whistler etchings—Yeats noted the etchings “let in” to white panels in his memoir.¹⁹¹ He drew significant pieces such as a bronze-inlaid overmantel and an elaborate dining room sideboard which was a large—eight feet tall by eight feet wide—linear, unornamented piece with combinations of open shelves and cabinet doors in a typical Godwin art furniture style. He even drew pieces of blue and white china on the top.¹⁹² (Figure 9)

Throughout the design and building process, Constance and Oscar Wilde were frequently in communication with Godwin, sending letters that pleaded for answers and appointments

¹⁸⁹ Oscar Wilde papers, Eccles Bequest, Add. 81753, Manuscript Reading Room, British Library, London, UK.

¹⁹⁰ V. Holland, 1999, 45.

¹⁹¹ Yeats, 1938, 117.

¹⁹² Godwin Sketches, Oscar Wilde papers, Eccles Bequest, Add. 81753, Manuscript Reading Room, British Library, London, UK.

from their oft-absent architect. Beginning many missives with an affectionate “Dear Godwino,” Oscar’s inquiries provide further clues to decorative choices at Tite Street and evidence that Godwin's designs were built. For example, in a letter dated December 1884, Oscar questioned the charges of his contractor and stated he had already paid for the overmantel in bedroom, drawing room and the sideboard "which by the bye I thought very dear."¹⁹³ The dining room, however, continued to be a center of activity with Wilde questioning Godwin in another letter about the sense of putting a fourteen-foot long shelf along one wall. Then, in the spring of 1885, he wrote "there is also a question of another board in dining room, and some kind of shelf, bracket, or little cupboard over it, a sort of Japanese arrangement of shelves – but very tiny."¹⁹⁴ Were these additional constructions in lieu of the sideboard or perhaps an edit of Godwin's original, grand design? Vyvyan remembered a glass-covered cabinet on the wall and a sideboard that sat on a platform one step above the floor, but does not mention its size or appearance.¹⁹⁵ The final furnishings of the room are unknown but a reasonable conclusion is that much of it was custom built to Godwin’s designs.

The Wildes’ white dining room was highly unusual for its day and its furniture was equally unusual for its designer. Known for his ebonized pieces (Figure 10), Godwin specified white furniture that Oscar found visually impressive, if a bit impractical. Wilde wrote in the spring of 1885, "I enclose a cheque and thank you very much for the beautiful designs of the

¹⁹³ Wilde to Godwin, December 1884, Oscar Wilde papers, Eccles Bequest, Add. 81690, Manuscript Reading Room, British Library, London, UK.

¹⁹⁴ Wilde to Godwin, February/March 1885, Oscar Wilde papers, Eccles Bequest, Add. 81690, Manuscript Reading Room, British Library, London, UK.

¹⁹⁵ V. Holland, 1999, 42.

furniture: each chair is a sonnet of ivory, and the table is a masterpiece in pearl."¹⁹⁶ However, when he actually had to live with it, he had a different assessment. "Dear Godwino, . . . Of course we miss you, but the white furniture reminds us of you daily, and we find that a rose leaf can be laid on the ivory table without scratching it—at least a white one can. That is something."¹⁹⁷ Other furniture in the house, as noted in the contractor's journal, was also painted in white enamel including "4 chairs, 2 settees, towel horse, wash stand, looking glass, 4 bedroom chairs."¹⁹⁸ The look was quite a departure from the overstuffed mahoganies and ebonized *Japonisme* of the rest of fashionable London. In the end, even Oscar was perhaps concerned about the austere appearance of his white furniture and plain painted walls, asking Godwin to "do just add the bloom of color to it in curtains and cushions."¹⁹⁹

The letters to Godwin also reveal details of some of the furniture and decorative touches. Both Constance and Oscar were interested in adding Japanese elements to the décor. The 1884 International Health Exhibition, known as the "Healtheries," in London was the apparent focus of their acquisitions. Constance writes to Godwin that the contractor, Sharpe, has "gone today to the Healtheries to get the Japanese things."²⁰⁰ Oscar apparently wanted to shop with his architect, writing that "I want if possible to spend a day with you at the Healtheries – the Japanese court is exquisite."²⁰¹ Vyvyan recalled the results saying in his

¹⁹⁶ Wilde to Godwin, February/March 1885, Oscar Wilde papers, Eccles Bequest, Add. 81690, Manuscript Reading Room, British Library, London, UK.

¹⁹⁷ Hart-Davis, 2000, 257.

¹⁹⁸ Work order of contractor George Sharpe, Dece 8, 1884, Oscar Wilde papers, Eccles Bequest, Add. 81691, Manuscript Reading Room, British Library, London, UK.

¹⁹⁹ Wilde to Godwin, December 1884, Oscar Wilde papers, Eccles Bequest, Add. 81690, Manuscript Reading Room, British Library, London, UK.

²⁰⁰ C. Wilde to Godwin, November 10, 1884, Oscar Wilde papers, Eccles Bequest, Add. 81691, Manuscript Reading Room, British Library, London, UK.

²⁰¹ Wilde to Godwin, November 1884, Oscar Wilde papers, Eccles Bequest, Add. 81690, Manuscript Reading Room, British Library, London, UK.

autobiography that in “the first floor Pre-Raphaelitism was given free rein, though a certain amount of Japonaiserie had crept in.” He remembered “black-and-white bamboo chairs and bulrushes in Japanese vases.”²⁰² According to Wilde’s bankruptcy catalogue, a Japanese embroidered silk gown adorned his study.²⁰³ The Wildes clearly shared Godwin’s view that Japanese pieces were perfect decorative additions to their artistic home.

The only available assessment of Wilde’s own opinion of his home came in a letter to architect and designer W.A.S. Benson, dated May 1885. In arguing against Benson about the decorative benefit of wallpaper, Wilde also exposed his attitude toward his dwelling as a sanctuary of repose and inspiration. He praised painted walls for their cleanliness and the fact that embroideries and oil paintings do not spoil the appearance. He explained that a “knowledge of color harmonies” was essential. “I have for instance a dining-room done in different shades of white, with white curtains embroidered in yellow-silk: the effect is absolutely delightful, and the room is beautiful.” He continues:

My eye requires in a room a resting-place of pure color, and I prefer to keep design for more delicate materials than papers, for embroidery for instance. Paper in itself is not a lovely material, and the only papers which I ever use now are the Japanese gold ones: they are exceedingly decorative, and no English paper can compete with them, either for beauty or for practical wear. With these and with color in oil and distemper a lovely house can be made.

Some day if you do us the pleasure of calling I will show you a little room with blue ceiling and frieze (distemper), yellow (oil) walls, and white woodwork and fittings, which is joyous and exquisite, the only piece of design being the Morris blue-and-white curtains, and a white-and-yellow silk coverlet. I hope, and in my lectures always try and bring it about, that people will study the value of pure color more than they do. The ugly ceilings of modern houses are often due to the excessive use of wallpapers, and I do not think Morris himself sets the exaggerated value on wallpapers which you do.

Anybody with a real artistic sense must see the value and repose of pure color, and even taking the matter in a practical light, wallpapers collect dirt and dust to a great extent and

²⁰² V. Holland, 1999, 43.

²⁰³ Mumby, 1971, 385.

cannot be cleaned. They are economical and often pretty and charming but they are not the final word of Art in decoration by any means.²⁰⁴

Thus, Wilde described the creative intersection of two leading Aesthetes: Godwin and himself. They had harmonized pure colors, removed “enervating” wallpapers, simplified the artful furnishings, and composed a restful environment. It was their manifestation of the modern interior.

In December 1887, for the first article in the first issue of his editorship of *The Woman's World*, Oscar Wilde asked Lady Archibald Campbell to write an appreciation of E.W. Godwin. She wrote, “The arts seemed to yield their secrets to him, and for him Nature opened her scroll, while with exquisite spirit of choice, and delicate tact of emission, he would, from both these worlds of wonder, select all congruous elements of beauty and of strength, and combine them into works of perfect symmetry and right proportion.”²⁰⁵ This high praise for the architect of Aestheticism reflects not only his position in the movement but the esteem in which Wilde still held his friend who had died in 1886. No. 16 Tite Street was Godwin's last interior design commission.²⁰⁶ In Wilde, he had a willing client who allowed him to continue experimenting with his design and colors ideas and to expand his quest for tranquil, healthful and beautiful home environments. In the process, Godwin, the manufacturer, had made Wilde, the marketer, real. He helped Wilde to place his assiduously cultivated image in a tangible environment, surroundings that positioned him socially and artistically in the circles of London elites that he desired to frequent and impress. W.B Yeats would give this astute assessment: “It was perhaps too perfect in its unity, his past of a few

²⁰⁴ Hart-Davis, 2000, 258-9.

²⁰⁵ Janey Sevilla Campbell (Lady Archibald Campbell), “The Woodland Gods,” *The Woman's World* 1 (December 1887), 2.

²⁰⁶ Susan W. Soros, “E.W. Godwin and Interior Design,” in Soros, 1999, 220.

years before had gone too completely, and I remember thinking that the perfect harmony of his life there, with his beautiful wife and his two young children, suggested some deliberate artistic composition.”²⁰⁷ Yet, to say that Godwin merely created one of his theatrical set pieces for Wilde is simplistic and trite. Wilde’s family lived relatively ordinary, comfortable lives in the home, and that is precisely what Godwin and Wilde had been preaching to their audiences. Ordinary homes and average lives can be enhanced by simple interiors and beautiful objects. Wilde would prove this point to society and Godwin would prove to it his peers.

²⁰⁷ Yeats, 1938, 117.

CHAPTER FOUR

WILDE'S INTENTIONS: Taking Aestheticism into the 1890s

Looking back on Oscar Wilde's role in the Aesthetic Movement, his acquaintance W. Graham Robertson stated, "His 'serio-comic' position as High Priest of Aestheticism was won in drawing rooms by means of persistently making a fool of himself, a method which to him must have presented many difficulties and which he dropped altogether after a few years of youthful spirits." He also posited that Wilde's reputation as a serious writer was obscured by his frivolous youthful endeavors.²⁰⁸ Robertson's criticism was not completely fair. As demonstrated, Wilde's American lectures were more "serio" than comic, and he pursued the decoration of his house with the care and consideration that he had impressed on his audiences. Yet, Robertson's conclusion does have an element of truth. After 1884, Wilde did seem to abandon his active role as decorative taste advisor. For the remainder of the 1880s, Wilde fulfilled his desire to return to literary pursuits, writing reviews, publishing fairy tales and poetry, editing *The Woman's World*—in which his editor's notes focused almost exclusively on literature—and finally publishing his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Only his continuing campaign for dress reform was evidence that he still wished to reform Victorian tastes. However, in the early 1890s, Wilde published a group of essays on art, criticism, and politics that demonstrated he that still had something to say. Aestheticism was not a velvet overcoat to be discarded when it no longer proved advantageous. In "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," "The Decay of Lying," and "The Critic as Artist," Wilde confirmed his independence from the views of John Ruskin and William Morris and his loyalty to Walter Pater's aestheticism. He returned to themes from his lectures including individualism, the

²⁰⁸ W. Graham Robertson, *Time Was*, (New York: Quartet Books, 1981), 137.

quest for beauty, and the creation of art devoid of imitation and rationality—in other words, art for art’s sake.

In “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” Wilde advocated Morris’s desire for political change under socialism, but turned it on edge to produce a simultaneously progressive and Hellenistic view of life and art—one that created more social and cultural than political transformation. Wilde’s socialist utopia was not an agrarian idyll of contented, suntanned workers living off the land and sewing their own clothes in a world without railroads and factories.²⁰⁹ Instead he stated that “progress is the realization of Utopias.” It was not a finite place but the quest for a better life. Humanity reached its utopia only to look out to seek the next one on the map.²¹⁰ Nor did he reject the tools of the modern era. His socialist utopia was not an old medieval world, but a new Greek society where machine replaced slave. When machines took over human drudgery and produced all things useful, men and women were free to live “as Greeks, striving for self-actualization, beauty, pleasure.”²¹¹

For Wilde, “socialism itself will be of value simply because it will lead to Individualism,” and individualism was essential for the artist, that most imaginative and independent thinker.²¹² To excel, the artist must be unrestrained and socialism was his path to freedom. It eliminated the tyranny of private property, without which the artist would create only from his desire, without the need to earn a living or satisfy the demands of the acquisitive public. Unfettered by public taste, the artist would make only the most exquisite objects, thus improving life

²⁰⁹ William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, in *Three Works*. New York: International Publishers, 1973.

²¹⁰ Wilde, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” in Ellman, 1982, 270.

²¹¹ Wilde, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” in Ellman, 1982, 269-270.

²¹² Wilde, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” in Ellman, 1982, 257.

and spreading beauty. Moreover, without possessions, all individuals will simply live: “To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all.”²¹³

“The Decay of Lying” was Wilde’s final refutation of Ruskin, his Oxford professor who preached truth to nature, a view that still held sway in much of the Victorian world. Across the essay, Wilde argued for his famous dictum: life imitates art. He believed that art should only express itself and the imagination of the artist; it should be under no obligation to reproduce aspects of life or nature. In fact, he stated that nature was a poor designer whose creations art must perfect and refashion, for “even Morris’ poorest workman could make you a more comfortable seat than the whole of Nature can.”²¹⁴ As he had done in his American lectures, he promoted Japanese design, arguing that slavish imitation was a contemporary and Western problem: “The whole history of these [decorative] arts in Europe is the record of the struggle between Orientalism, with its frank rejection of imitation, its love of artistic convention, its dislike to the actual representation of any object in Nature, and our own imitative spirit.”²¹⁵ However, within the same pages, he also seemed to contradict some of his arguments about taking inspiration from the modern, without necessarily implying that historicism was a solution. He stated that “pure modernity of form is always somewhat vulgarizing. It cannot help being so. The public imagine that, because they are interested in their immediate surroundings, Art should be interested in them also, and should take them as her subject matter. But the mere fact that they are interested in these things makes them unsuitable subjects for Art. The only beautiful things, as somebody

²¹³ Wilde, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” in Ellman, 1982, 262.

²¹⁴ Wilde, “The Decay of Lying,” in Ellman, 1982, 291.

²¹⁵ Wilde, “The Decay of Lying,” in Ellman, 1982, 303.

once said, are the things that do not concern us.”²¹⁶ Yet he told his lecture audiences that useful things concern us, and useful things are supposed to be beautiful. Perhaps Wilde is simply criticizing the limited outlook of the Victorian public on art’s subject matter, not abandoning his useful/beautiful axiom.

In the two-part dialogue of “The Critic as Artist,” Wilde returned discernibly to his Aesthetic philosophies. He still believed that art was marred by the “intellectual intent” of the artist, now arguing not only that art should be amoral, but that morality, although necessary, was in fact subordinate to art: “Aesthetics are higher than ethics. They belong to a more spiritual sphere. To discern the beauty of a thing is the finest point to which we can arrive. Even a color-sense is more important, in the development of the individual, than a sense of right and wrong.”²¹⁷ Despite his call for visual inspiration, this essay demonstrated that he had developed an intellectual component to Pater’s purely sensory Aestheticism. Wilde believed that art should not only arouse emotional interest, but also compel contemplation. He complained that private gallery viewings were full of people asking one, “What are you doing?” “whereas ‘What are you thinking?’ is the only question that any single civilized being should ever be allowed to whisper to another.”²¹⁸ Still, he advocated the contemplation of the dreamer, not the logician, warning that “there are two ways of disliking art. One is to dislike it. The other, to like it rationally.”²¹⁹

²¹⁶ Wilde, “The Decay of Lying,” in Ellman, 1982, 299.

²¹⁷ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” in Ellman, 1982, 406.

²¹⁸ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” in Ellman, 1982, 380-381.

²¹⁹ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” in Ellman, 1982, 392.

In “The Critic as Artist,” Wilde continued advocating for the decorative arts and tasteful interior decoration as essential to everyone’s emotional well-being. He echoes his friend Godwin in a passage about the “arts that touch us”:

The art that is frankly decorative is the art to live with. It is, of all visible arts, the one art that creates in us both mood and temperament. Mere color, unspoiled by meaning, and unallied with definite form, can speak to the soul in a thousand different ways. The harmony that resides in the delicate proportions of lines and masses becomes mirrored in the mind. The repetitions of pattern give us rest. The marvels of design stir the imagination. In the mere loveliness of the materials employed there are latent elements of culture. Nor is this all. By its deliberate rejection of Nature as the ideal of beauty, as well as of the imitative method of the ordinary painter, decorative art not merely prepares the soul for the reception of true imaginative work, but develops in it that sense of form which is the basis of creative no less than of critical achievement. For the real artist is he who proceeds, not from feeling to form, but from form to thought and passion.²²⁰

Apparently his reposeful Godwin-designed rooms were having the desired effect, an effect he wished his reader to experience. For if art belonged to the realm of the mind and the senses, then the appropriately decorated interior can bring that realm to every homeowner, not just an elite few. Wilde had held that democratic view since his days delivering lectures in North America.

While the essays prove that Wilde strongly espoused the views from his early life in Aesthetic circles, their academic nature probably meant that they reached a narrow audience. Unfortunately, late in his career, Wilde would make his arguments to a wider public. In the early 1890s, his friend Algernon Swinburne was criticized for alleged bestiality and pederasty evident in his poems, and Wilde’s play *Salomé* and novel *The Picture of Dorian Grey* had aroused outrage among many critics. When threatened with restricted artistic freedom, Wilde fought back, channeling the spirits of Poe, Gautier and Baudelaire. The publication of *Dorian Gray* unleashed a storm of criticism, prompting this response to the editor of the *Scots Observer* in August 1890: “The artist will always look at the work of art from the standpoint of beauty of

²²⁰ Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” in Ellman, 1982, 398.

style and beauty of treatment, and that those who have not got the sense of beauty, or whose sense of beauty is dominated by ethical considerations, will always turn their attention to the subject-matter and make its moral import the test and touchstone of the poem, or novel, or picture.”²²¹ In December 1891, Wilde wrote a letter to Edmond de Goncourt, simultaneously defending and quoting Swinburne: “Le public anglais, comme d’ordinaire hypocrite, prude et philistin, n’a pas su trouver l’art dans l’oeuvre d’art: il y a cherché l’homme. Comme il confond toujours l’homme avec ses créations, il pense que pour créer Hamlet il faut être un peu mélancolique, pour imaginer Lear absolument fou.”²²² Sadly, in 1895, Wilde relied on his aesthetic arguments one last time, albeit unsuccessfully. In his first trial for gross indecency, he defended himself against the accusations of the prosecutor, Edward Carson:

Carson: “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That expresses your view?”

Wilde: “My view on art, yes.”

C: “Then I take it, no matter how immoral a book may be, if it is well written, it is, in your opinion, a good book?”

W: “Yes, if were well written so as to produce a sense of beauty, which is the highest sense of which a human being can be capable. If it were badly written, it would produce a sense of disgust.”

C: “Then a well-written book putting forward perverted moral views may be a good book?”

W: “No work of art ever puts forward views. Views belong to people who are not artists.”²²³

Wilde was the consummate aesthete to the very end of his career. With lectures, essays, articles and a partnership with Aestheticism’s leading designer, Wilde made a serious intellectual contribution to one of the important nineteenth-century design reform movements. In addition, his fame and notoriety brought Aestheticism’s views to much wider

²²¹ Hart-Davis 2000, 448.

²²² Hart-Davis, 2000, 505. “The English public, those ordinary hypocrites, prudes and Philistines, do not know how to find art in a work of art: they look for the man. They always confuse the man with his creations; they think that in order to create Hamlet, it is necessary to be a bit melancholic, in order to imagine Lear, absolutely crazy.” Translated by the author.

²²³ H. Montgomery Hyde, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1962), 109-110.

audiences than Godwin or Pater ever could, regardless of how easily those views were accepted. Yet how much impact did he and his cohort have on late Victorian interiors? The ever-confidant apostle claimed success, believing that the artist had led the way by creating beautiful objects that the public was obligated to purchase: “Beautiful things began to be made, beautiful colors came from the dyer’s hand, beautiful patterns from the artist’s brain, and the use of beautiful things and their value and importance were set forth . . . And now it is almost impossible to enter any modern house without seeing some recognition of good taste, some recognition of the value of lovely surroundings, some sign of appreciation of beauty.”²²⁴ The reality was less certain. By the 1890s, the Aesthetes quest for beauty, quality, and simplicity influenced few outside of their own circle and was probably a limited middle class phenomenon.²²⁵ Even at no. 16 Tite Street, Wilde’s bankruptcy catalogue reveals a home a bit stuffed with books, rugs, art and objects, despite its simplified white dining room. Furthermore, Wilde’s undaunted defense of the concept of art for art’s sake undoubtedly contributed to his downfall, as a nervous Victorian public equated Aestheticism with immorality and decadence, rather than the unqualified enjoyment of a lovely object.

Wilde was prescient enough to recognize that the philosophy of the Aesthetic Movement was only a beginning; it had succeeded in eliminating the ugly while making a path for improved art and decoration. In “The Critic as Artist” he stated:

All over England there is a Renaissance of the decorative Arts. Ugliness has had its day. Even in the houses of the rich there is taste, and the houses of those who are not rich have been made gracious and comely and sweet to live in . . . What has been done up to now, has been chiefly in the clearing of the way. It is always more difficult to destroy than it is to create, and when what one has to destroy is vulgarity and stupidity, the task of destruction needs not merely courage but also contempt. Yet it seems to me to have been, in a measure, done. We have got rid of what was bad. We have now to make what is beautiful. And though the mission of the aesthetic movement is to lure people to contemplate, not to lead

²²⁴ Wilde, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” in Ellman, 1982, 281.

²²⁵ Cooper, 1977, 8.

them to create, yet, as the creative instinct is strong in the Celt, and it is the Celt who leads in art, there is no reason why in future years this strange Renaissance should not become almost as mighty in its way as was that new birth of Art that woke many centuries ago in the cities of Italy.²²⁶

By the turn of the twentieth century, the Edwardians were indeed ridding their homes of wallpapers and bric-à-brac and living in lighter, spacious interiors. (Figure 11) The modernists would chant simplicity as their mantra. Finally, in eliminating intellectual intention and moral imperative, the cubists, abstractionists and other modern movements would create art that expressed only itself and its truth: beauty.

Oscar Wilde would have approved.

²²⁶ Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," in Ellman, 1982, 396.

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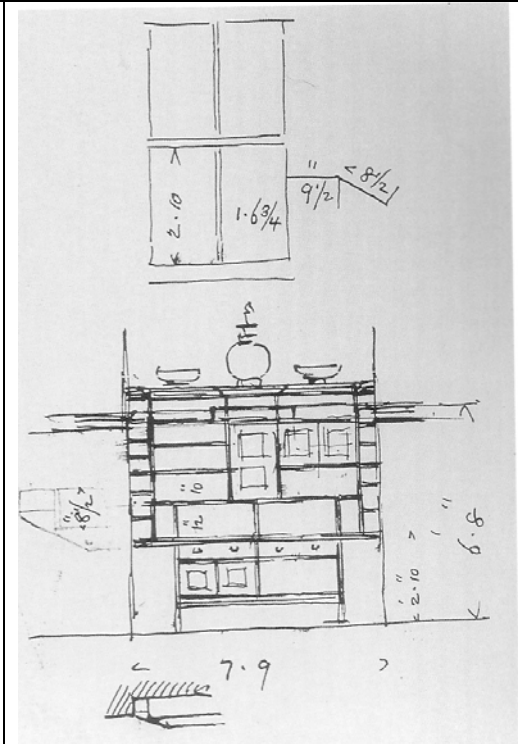
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<p>Figure 5</p>	<p>James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) <i>Nocturne in Blue and Silver – Cremorne Gardens</i>, 1872 oil on canvas Tate Britain N03420</p>	

<p>Figure 6</p>	<p>Congleton Town Hall, Congleton, Cheshire, UK E.W. Godwin, 1866 Photographed by author</p>	 A black and white photograph of Congleton Town Hall. The building is a prime example of Gothic Revival architecture, featuring a tall, square clock tower with a crenellated top and a clock face. Below the tower, there are several arched windows and doorways, some of which are flanked by statues. The building is constructed of dark stone or brick. The sky is bright with some clouds.
<p>Figure 7</p>	<p>Frank Miles's house No. 1 Tite Street, Chelsea London, UK Photographed by author</p>	 A black and white photograph of Frank Miles's house, No. 1 Tite Street. The building is a multi-story brick structure with a prominent bay window on the second floor. The bay window has a white balcony. The building has a classic Victorian architectural style with decorative elements around the windows and doors. A silver car is parked on the street in front of the house.

<p>Figure 8</p>	<p>Oscar Wilde's house No. 16 Tite Street, Chelsea London, UK Photographed by author</p>	
<p>Figure 9</p>	<p>Design for Wilde's sideboard 1884 E.W. Godwin Godwin Sketches, Oscar Wilde papers, Eccles Bequest, Add. 81753, Manuscript Reading Room, British Library, London, UK</p>	

<p>Figure 10</p>	<p>Side chair, c. 1880 E.W. Godwin for William Watt Sotheby's sales catalogue, The Best of British, March 2008</p>	
<p>Figure 11</p>	<p>Drawing room 54 Melville Street, Edinburgh, Scotland Photographed by H. Bedford Lemere, October 1904 English Heritage NMR BL18653</p>	