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978-0-521-12678-6 - Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by James W. Tuttleton, Kristin O. Lauer and Margaret P. Murray

Excerpt

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THE DECORATION OF HOUSES

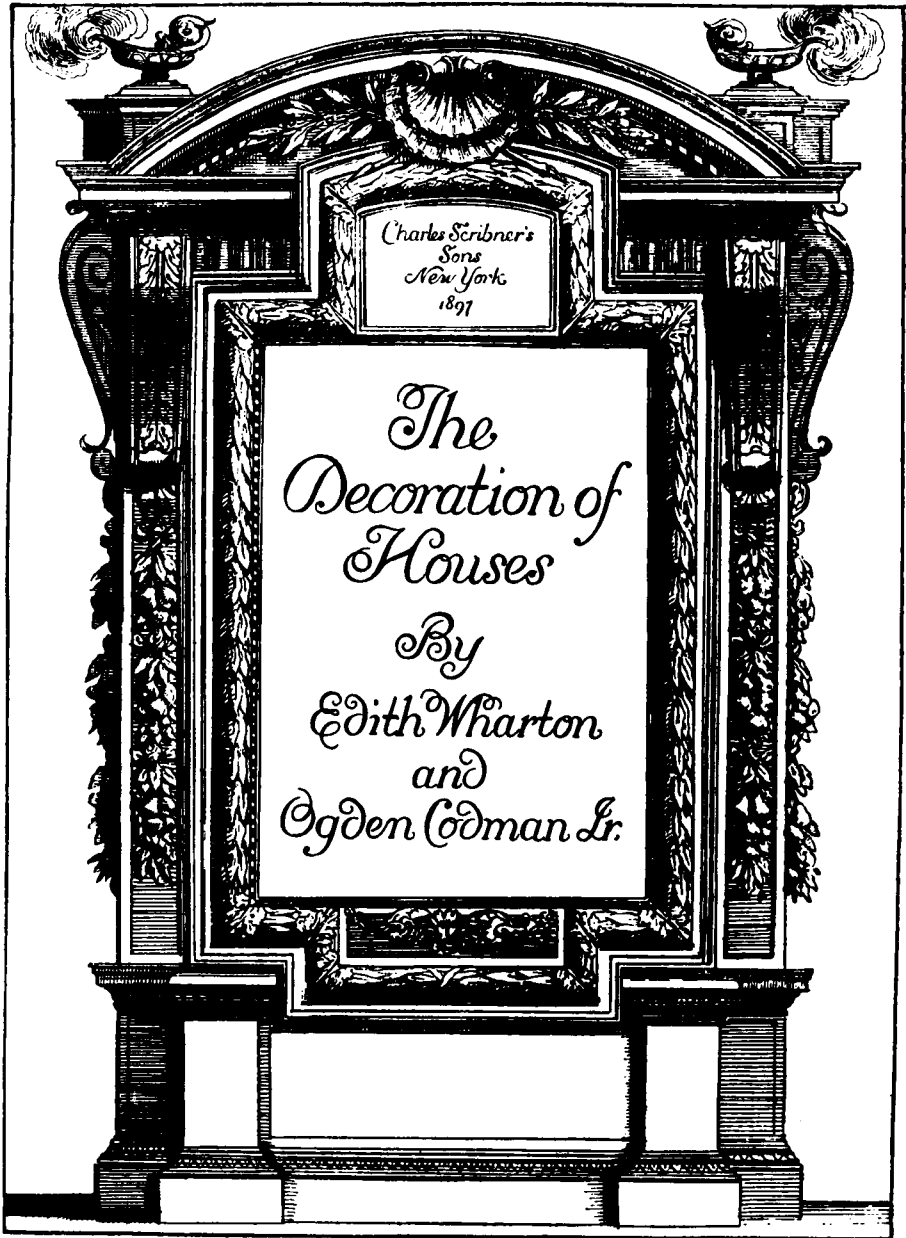
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Review of *The Decoration of Houses, Nation*, 65 (16 December 1897), 485

One opens a new book on decoration with a weary anticipation, remembering how much has been lately written on the subject for Americans, and to how little purpose; but now the whole style and practice of decoration has changed, and the teaching of the last generation has become obsolete. *The Decoration of Houses*, a handsome, interesting, and well-written book, not only is an example of the recent reversion to quasi-classic styles and methods, but signalizes the complete reaction that has thrown to the winds, even before the public discovered it, perhaps, the lately accepted doctrines of constructive virtue, sincerity, and the beauty of use. The authors take the new ground uncompromisingly, snap their fingers at sincerity, have no horror of shams, and stand simply on proportion, harmony of lines, and other architectural qualities. Any “*trompe l’œil*” is permissible in decorative design,” they say, “if it gives an impression of pleasure.” To this have we already come; yet it seems not to have produced harmony between the outside and the inside of their volume.

The thread of their discussion is historical. Its fifty illustrations, taken from Italian, French, and English interiors, with a somewhat omnivorous appetite, are of various interest; but the book is the fruit of study, and of a larger knowledge of

examples than has commonly been the case with its predecessors. It is aimed, not at professional readers, but at the public, whom it instructs with many intelligent criticisms and sensible directions, calling their attention to artistic aspects of decoration which have been neglected by writers of the last dispensation. It touches the root of present difficulty when it says in the preface, that “the vulgarity of current decoration has its source in the indifference of the wealthy to architectural fitness.” But to the authors, architectural fitness means agreeable proportions and combination of lines and no more.

The temptation of the literature that we have left behind was that any ready-witted writer could discourse magisterially about decoration; and, inasmuch as his material was pure theory, it called for neither experience nor knowledge, nor yet for artistic or technical acquirement; in truth, after the beginning, the writers were mainly literary men and amateurs. Nevertheless there were valuable truths in their writings, and principles which, under due limitation, should have infused freshness, vitality, and manliness into decorative work. If these have been forgotten before they have borne their due fruit, the fruit may have been in the narrowness, vehemence, and want of technical enlightenment with which they were urged. But whether we are morally wise, or historically, the things we need for decorative work are taste and instinct for form—qualities which still wait their development among Americans. Till these are evolved, we must either intrust ourselves to professional hands, or be left to vibrate between the diets of dilettanti on the one hand and doctrinaires on the other.

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“Hints for Home
 Decoration,”
Critic, 32 (8 January
 1898), 20

Progress in ideas regarding the beauty and fitness of the ordering of house interiors is registered by the appearance of a book like this. Hitherto, such works have been of a general nature, covering much ground and teaching general elementary facts concerning the adornment of the home. Into the finer shades of house decoration it was not thought necessary or wise to go, because the public was not ready for it. There was still much education in such matters required before people should become knowing and fastidious enough to pick and choose among the abundant material gathered and still being gathered in the countries where specimens of old and modern decoration worthy of adaptation or direct imitation abound.

The salient feature of the present work is the effort of the authors to separate the decoration of palaces and grand houses from that of simpler residences and homes, thereby keeping always in the mind of the reader the needfulness of adapting decoration to the place where it is to remain. The great majority of people who may consult a book of the kind are not owners of palaces, but when they travel in Europe it is palaces for the most part which they examine and even if the palace contains apartments and suites arranged for the simple requirements of a family, the tourist rarely sees them, because they are not supposed to care for them, or because only the gala rooms and chambers are open to the public.

The illustrations, however, are largely drawn from just such magnificent places

of temporary abode or festal use, so that to a person turning over the leaves of this book a false idea of its contents is conveyed. Not that the text ignores the decoration of splendid interiors. There is stuff here for the delectation and instruction of those who propose to build the most elaborate Newport palace-villa or the most modern of highly decorated hotels. But the authors thoroughly appreciate that the ordinary well-to-do person is not by way of decorating anything so costly, and have arranged their materials to suit him rather than the millionaire.

A note struck at the outset vibrates through the whole book, and it is a strong and true note. The decoration of an interior should harmonize with—nay, it should naturally be based upon—the architecture of the building. The discordance of decoration with architecture found so constantly nowadays is traced to the variety of styles demanded of the architect. “Before 1800 the decorator called upon to treat the interior of a house invariably found a suitable background prepared for his work, while much in the way of detail was intrusted to the workmen, who were trained in certain traditions, instead of being called upon to carry out in each new house the vagaries of a different designer.” The leading part played by architecture in the proper decoration of an interior is emphasized; the authors go so far as to forbid the hanging of pictures tilted outward from the wall because these no longer take their true position as part of the architectural decoration of an interior, as they might if flat against the wall.

After a chapter on the “historical tradition,” in which is noted the fact that the burgher of one generation lives more like the aristocrat of a previous generation than like his own predecessors, and that modern houses should look for precedents to the smaller apartments of palaces rather than the gala rooms, the subject of rooms

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in general is taken up. Here some pertinent remarks on fireplaces and furniture are introduced. The chapter on walls begins with the axiom, "Proportion is the good breeding of architecture"; that on doors considers the iniquity of sliding doors and portières. In the fifth chapter windows are considered and many sensible remarks are made concerning curtains, shades and shutters. The same may be said of the chapter on fireplaces. Ceiling and floor, hall and stairs, drawing-room, boudoir and morning-room are treated in three chapters. Gala rooms come next, followed by library and smoking-room. Dining-rooms, bedrooms, and school-room occupy three chapters and a concluding chapter is given to bric-à-brac. "Taste attaches but two conditions to the use of objects of art: that they shall be in scale with the rooms and that the room shall not be overcrowded with them." "Any work of art, regardless of its intrinsic merit, must justify its presence in a room by being more valuable than the space it occupies—more valuable, that is to say, to the general scheme of decoration."

These are a few principles laid down for the guidance of people striving to make their houses within not only comfortable but enduringly beautiful. Some of the æsthetic conclusions reached by the authors will seem too finely drawn; others are certainly too sweeping; but it is clear that much reading, much travel in Italy and France, and a good deal of independent thinking stand behind this pretty book. The illustrations are abundant, and while not intended as examples to imitate, reinforce the arguments in the text. They comprise simple pieces of furniture from different epochs as well as details of interiors in famous palaces in Italy and France. It depends very much on the kind of house to be decorated, whether a reader will get much direct aid and comfort from the

book. Yet it is certain that no one can fail to learn a great deal from it and become, through reading it, more appreciative of what is worth noting in modern architecture as well as in the old buildings of Europe.

Edwin H. Blashfield,
"House Decoration,"
Book Buyer, 16 (March
1898), 129–33

This book has come at an opportune moment. At the World's Fair it was proved beyond peradventure that when architect, sculptor, and painter work in harmony the result is good. Since then, terms hardly known before in America have become familiar: "mural painting," "architectural sculpture," "the allied arts," and on all sides one hears of the "Decorative Art movement."

Societies have been formed in behalf of the allied arts as applied to the treatment of great public monuments. Mrs. Wharton and Mr. Codman have in turn stepped forward as the protagonists of harmony in the treatment of that lesser but perhaps even more important monument, the private house, they show us the *room* as a part of the art evolution, that proportion governs here as elsewhere, that every part of the room or its furnishing, from the great chimney-piece to the smallest tabouret, is an enlisted soldier in the service of a general effect, that not a chair nor a table can be autonomous but rather that all must be disciplined. In sum, they show us that a room must not only relate to its own uses, but that all of its parts are interdependent and that it is in itself as much a composition as is any picture. To this wide field for the enunciation of

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principles, the balancing of relations, Mrs. Wharton and Mr. Codman have brought sincerity, enthusiasm, taste, technical knowledge, and clearness of presentation; once within the entrance hall of their house, they establish themselves firmly upon proportion as their guiding principle.

The lesson of their book is that, within this governed circle, invention, even inspiration at times, may find room for being, but that without it there is at once a disequilibrium which soon degenerates into chaos. Governing principles cannot be too plainly enunciated in a country which, like America, is in its aesthetically formative period. In a land which has art traditions, where the background is centuries old, the decorator working from a full mind may be pardoned many fantasies, the all-compelling sense of tradition will bring him back after he has had his fling; but in a new country, the man or woman who has just returned from Europe finds it hard to realize that the orderly confusion of the best houses there is the result of evolution, not of eccentricity. It ensues that in the new country barbarisms will abound, the result of an ignorant eclecticism which takes as readily from a decadent period as from one of upgrowth, from the Second Empire as from the *cinquecento*. Even when a good thing is chosen an untrained would-be decorator will often push it too far, and for the sake of his special effect will sacrifice the ensemble. Against all such procedure Mrs. Wharton and Mr. Codman set their faces resolutely. They lead us through the house from room to room; they remind us, and the modern householder has need of their reminder, that walls are meant to support something, that doors are for entrance and exit, that windows should give light and may be looked from, that fire-places may contain fire and should not be draped with silks nor even with woollens. They lead us by hall and stairs, and show us that a

place of passage differs in its requirements from a place of rest; they note "the mixed ancestry" of the modern drawing-room, half *bourgeois*, half *gala* in character (we all remember its caricature, "Boffin's Bower," where the husband's end of the room had a sanded floor and deal chairs, while that "highflyer at fashion," Mrs. Boffin, had gilding and upholstery at her end of the Bower). They take us through ball-room and gallery, and show us that the spacious magnificence of Italian state apartments was intended by their creators to relate not to the garish daylight which accompanies the modern tourist, but to torches and candles; and on their way through the music-room, they plead for more grace in the form of the piano, which has so suffered from "its elephantine supports" and the "weak curves of the lid." In the library they note the decorative value of books, and in the dining-room demand that light-colored walls shall help to light the whole room and thus to minimize the heat produced by artificial over-lighting; in the bed-room they denounce the upholstering into fixtures of stuff which should be movable and washable; last of all, in the nursery they find that the child who is to grow into the man or woman is well worthy to be influenced by an aesthetic environment.

Some readers may sigh that they cannot live up to such an ideal house as is here described, may say that in the economy of their aesthetic ordering they are forced by exiguity of space or by other considerations to run counter to some of the rules laid down by the authors; but the latter do not assert that the ideal is possible always or to all—their business is to enunciate principles and they do so emphatically and consistently. They would probably admit that their very consistency may sometimes, though rarely, force them to a conclusion unsuited to American conditions. Thus they say on page 41, in speak-

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ing of decorated walls, that many “artists who are wasting their energies on the production of indifferent landscapes and unsuccessful portraits might in the quite different field of decorative painting find the true expression of their talent.”

Given adherence to the principles laid down by the authors, this is logical enough, for such adherence builds up a school on sound traditions. The mural-painter of Pompeii, the Renaissance painter of unimportant wall surfaces, might be a fourth-rate man, yet do yeoman service, for he was born of tradition and fostered upon principles, but in America to-day even the second-rate painter would, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, be the very one who knows and cares nothing about traditional principles in wall-painting. His “decorations” would be intolerable, and we may nowhere demand more severity of training than in the man whose work is to be mural, that is to say, immovable and constantly before our eyes. Probably no one would subscribe more readily to this dictum than would Mrs. Wharton and Mr. Codman, who, throughout their book, insist first and last upon limitations within certain lines, subjection to certain principles.

Every chapter of their book contains sentences potential in their corrective value, and the text is accompanied by many clearly printed reproductions in regard to which the authors are careful to remind us that if, as the advocates of severity rather than of luxury, they have seemed to take their examples from palaces and peculiarly pretentious buildings, they have chosen such because rooms which have been visited by the average tourist are, from their familiarity, more easily comprehended and therefore more elucidative than would be less well known interiors.

The book is a thoroughly welcome one and should be a very present help to the

many who realize that the material environment of home life has a real influence, and who will be only too glad to find that this environment, if properly studied, can be understood, and that, although high art can be comprehended and great art possessed by few, any intelligent and well-to-do person may possess a good room or suite of rooms.

The authors address themselves to two classes, the moderately well-to-do and the wealthy. To the former they show that any well-proportioned room is a handsome room if not deformed by the application of bad detail, bad color, or the introduction of ugly furniture. In regard to the latter detail, furniture, etc., they further demonstrate that the greater cost of the good thing usually depends upon the fact that it is less commonly made than the bad thing, and show that once popularized it may become as cheap as its rival. In addressing themselves to the wealthy, the authors say quite truly that “every carefully studied detail examined by those who can afford to indulge their taste will in time find its way to the carpenter-built cottage,” and that “once the right precedent is established it costs less to follow than to oppose it.”

In fact, the effort of the authors is in the direction towards which every American architect, sculptor, painter, decorator, worthy of the name must tend if we would build up a national school of art; the direction which is pointed by “the sense of interrelation of parts, of unity of the whole . . . , the application of principles based on common sense and regulated by the laws of harmony and proportion.”

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Walter Berry,
*The Decoration of
 Houses,*
Bookman, 7 (April 1898),
 161–3

It is said by Vasari that Brunelleschi's chief desire was to bring back good architecture, the good orders, in place of the barbarous style which had effaced them. This effacement of the good by the barbarous, and, following the barbarous, a revival of the good by a return to past forms, past ideals, are part of a law of ebb and flow everywhere visible in art. In every science the condition of progress is a continuous straining forward; in art and its allied branches this condition is often reversed: to advance may be to look backward. In analysing the latter proposition the first cause occurring in explanation is that of the loss, or at least the dulling, of the sense of simplicity. In the best Greek architecture, for instance, a small quantity of exquisite ornament is surrounded by plainness, making both doubly beautiful; in French Renaissance architecture, every surface is covered, leaving no spot on which the eye can rest, so that the whole becomes immoderate, confused, bewildering. This sense of the value of plainness is characteristic of every great age of art; in every period of decline exaggeration, pretentiousness, display, are dominant.

In no branch of art has a period of decline been more distinctly marked than in the decoration of houses during the last eighty years. The traditions of centuries, the ultimate tests of excellence—moderation, fitness, proportion—have become obscured, and what was once interior architecture has degenerated into mere

upholstery. Indeed, so completely have these traditions been lost sight of, that for the last half century not a single work on house decoration as a branch of architecture has been published in England or in America.

It is to remedy this deficiency that *The Decoration of Houses* has been written, and the result is a work of large insight and appreciation, one that is certain to exert lasting influence in the revival of a subject generally misunderstood and mistreated.

The main theories which the book works out are simple, and may be summed up in a few words:

First. The true standpoint of interior decoration is that of *architectural proportion*, in contradistinction to the modern view, which is that of *superficial application of ornament*.

Second. Only a return to architectural principles, to the traditions and models of the past, can raise house decoration from incongruity and confusion to organic unity.

Third. Given the requirements of modern life, these models are chiefly to be found in buildings erected in Italy after the beginning of the sixteenth century, and especially in France and England after the full assimilation of the Italian influence.

Following the lines here indicated, the opening chapter, entitled "The Historical Tradition," after a brief outline of the stormy, unsettled conditions of mediæval life and the consequent impress of such conditions on both exterior and interior architecture, indicates the persistence of this feudal period, owing to the conflicts between the great nobles and the kings, both in France and in England. In Italy, however, social intercourse advanced more rapidly, and it is clearly shown that the rudimentary plan, the characteristic tendencies of our own house-planning, were developed from the mezzanine or inter-

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mediate story of the Italian Renaissance palace. Thus it may be said that Bramante is the father of the modern dwelling, but as the use of the mezzanine was not fully developed until the time of Peruzzi, the year 1500 represents an imaginary line drawn between mediæval and modern ways of living and house-planning.

Taking this as a starting-point, the process of development of house interiors is luminously traced: In Italy, from the “Massimi alle Colonne” to Palladio and to the decadence; in England, from the introduction of the Italian manner by Inigo Jones down to the Georgian models—those models which were afterward transported bodily to America and christened “colonial;” in France, throughout that long succession of artists, craftsmen, and artist-craftsmen who, from the ending of the Fronde almost to the present time, have ever remembered that the essence of a style lies not in its use of ornament, but in its handling of proportion, and of whom it may be said that whatever the hand found to do, that it did under the guidance of artistic fancy and feeling.

The broad lines being laid down, the fundamental principle—the importance of the right treatment of the component parts of an undecorated room—is fully developed. It was once thought that the effect of a room depended on the treatment of its wall-spaces and openings; now it is supposed to depend on curtains and portières, on furniture and bric-à-brac. In the best period of architecture, decoration was subordinate to architectural lines, and as the effect produced by a room depends mainly on the distribution of its openings, it becomes apparent that unless these and the surrounding wall-spaces are in right proportion there can be no harmony among the decorative processes. This factor, so fully dwelt upon by all the old decorators, from Vignola to Ware, has fallen into decay, and it is curious to note

that in Eastlake’s well-known *Hints on Household Taste* no mention whatever is made of doors, windows, and fireplaces.

The importance of the relations between proportion and decoration, between structure and ornament, having been strongly emphasised, each of the many rooms in a modern house is treated in turn, first from the evolutionary point of view, afterward from artistic and practical considerations. Not the least interesting part of the book is this tracing back the use of a room to its origin, showing that sometimes the present misuse is but a survival of older social conditions, or but the result of a misapprehension in regard to old customs through confusion of two essentially different types of rooms designed for essentially different phases of life.

From ball-rooms to nurseries, no part of the interior architecture of a house is omitted, the organic unities being always insisted on: the relation of a room as a whole to other rooms in the house, the relation of ornament to structure, the relation of furniture to ornament. Looking down the enfilade of the three great centuries, one is shown the incomparable ceilings of Mantegna, of Araldi, of Bérain; the perfect doors in the Ducal Palace of Mantua; the staircases of De Corny, the stair-rails of Jean Lamour and D’Ivry; the frescoes of Tiepolo and Le Riche; the carvings of Grinling Gibbons; the statues of Pajou; the mirrors of Mario dei Fiori. In these lucid pages and in the illustrations accompanying them, what rooms are held perfect, what models are in every sense worthy of admiration, all these, from a gala-room decorated by Giulio Romano to Cacialli’s bath-room in the Pitti Palace, are made to demonstrate that, however splendid, however ornate, their effect is based on such harmony of line that their superficial ornament might be removed without loss to the composition.

It is for this reason that a return to the

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traditions and models of the past is insisted on as the true way out of the labyrinth of incongruity wherein most modern decorators are helplessly wandering. The definite first conception—that decoration must harmonise with the structural limitation—a conception that held its own throughout every change of taste until the second quarter of the present century, has been effaced by a piling up of heterogeneous ornament, a multiplication of incongruous effects, much of which is held in admiration on account of its so-called originality. In art, “originality” is almost as fatal a term as “restoration.” Ignorant of the traditions of old, unskilled in legitimate artistic requirements, the average decorator stands in firm belief that to bend to the acceptance of rules, which experience of centuries has established as the best, is to preclude the exercise of individual taste and to become subservient and servile, forgetting the admirable precept of the forgotten Isaac Ware, that while “it is mean in the undertaker of a great work to copy strictly, it is dangerous to give a loose to fancy *without a perfect knowledge how far a variation may be justified.*”

It is clearly in the attempt to help on toward this “perfect knowledge” that the present book has been written.

It is not proposed to discuss at length the various features of this work, or to go into detail regarding the many subjects there treated. The purpose of this review is to differentiate *The Decoration of Houses* from the many *Suggestions on Household Taste*, and the like, most of which have served only to aggravate the very defects which the present book is attempting to remedy. If the distinctive underlying principle—that the true expression of interior decoration rests not in superficial application of ornament, but in architectural proportion—has been plainly indicated, it is enough, and one need only add by way of summary the comprehensive words of the Conclusion: “The relation of proportion to decoration is like that of anatomy to sculpture: underneath are the everlasting laws.”

Checklist of Additional Reviews

“*The Decoration of Houses,*” *Architect and Building News*, 22 January 1898, pp. 28–29.