

# **Interior Architecture: The Iconography of Culture and Order in Edith Wharton's Nonfiction**

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## **Introduction**

Edith Wharton is best known as a novelist of manners specializing in life in upper class New York City society around the turn of the 19th–20th centuries. In this paper I am focusing on work by another Edith Wharton: the author of travel books and a manual on interior design. In particular, I am going to take a look at two early texts of hers, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897) and *Italian Villas and their Gardens* (1904). These two are linked by the intellectual project they perform: showing the American audience the use of European art in everyday life. To put it in general terms, Wharton conveys a sense of cultural order to her American readers through examples of European architecture.

In her *The Social Construction of American Realism*, Amy Kaplan approaches Wharton's early work as an attempt to establish her position as a professional author. Kaplan claims that architecture is the metaphor of writing in Wharton, and both in her early fiction and nonfiction architecture represents the clash between a professional male tradition of writing and female amateur text production. So in her nonfiction, when Wharton discusses architecture, her statements can also be read as comments on her aim to become a professional female author. For instance in *The Decoration of Houses*, when she is describing architectural principles of interior decoration, she criticizes the concept of the domestic interior as the special space of women separate from male authored spaces of architectural design. So the term interior architecture

becomes a metaphor for criticizing the inside-outside divide, for thinking about a supposedly female space in supposedly male terms.

In my discussion of Wharton's early nonfiction I suggest that the gender oriented reading of these texts limits reflection on their other social aspects. Wharton's continual references to historical change, the historiography of art, and national features of cultures situate the gender aspect at the crossroads of other social aspects of culture. Although Wharton seems to set up manuals of interior architecture and garden design, I claim that in fact she lays out historically established principles of taste. She does not hold her arty examples up for copying, but rather for reflection: she offers meditations on the relation of art and everyday life. In her own terms, she reflects on the uses of civilization.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first part explicates the problem of professionalization and cultural work in Wharton's contemporary reception as a basis of my argument. The second part surveys of the importance of the metaphor of architecture for Wharton in her early fiction. The third part looks at how *The Decoration of Houses* relies on the notion of interior architecture while describing European examples of interior order. The fourth part studies how the volume on *Italian Villas* applies the notion of architecture for the space outside the house: the garden. The conclusion formulates the function of the nonfiction texts in more general terms than that of the professional female author. It explicates the approach Wharton performs towards architecture, art history, and cultural change in the texts.

### **1. The problem: female subversive potential in Wharton's texts**

During the 1980s Edith Wharton's *oeuvre* was reauthorized. The work was performed by scholars who foregrounded female subversive potential in her fiction. As Millicent Bell puts it: "Though she was no conscious feminist, it was felt that she had expressed her own struggles in fiction that showed her clear understanding of what it had meant to her to be a woman." (Bell 2005, 13) As a result, a multitude of books and articles have been published on the subject. The interest promoted biographical studies showing her life in terms of feminist psychopathology, (Bell 2005, 13) as well as monographs investigating the commodification in the formation of the female artist's character (Bell 2005, 14). This image of Wharton also appears in literary overviews: for instance in 1984,

Amy Kaplan in her *The Social Construction of American Realism* articulated the commodification of the figure of the female artist in terms of the division between private and public sphere. “[Wharton’s] writing is situated at a complex intersection of class and gender. Wharton attempted to construct a separate personality in the mind of the public and to write herself out of the private domestic sphere, (Kaplan 1984, 79) inscribing a public identity in the marketplace, unlike contemporary lady novelists of the domestic sphere like H. B. Stowe and Catherine Sedgwick. (Wright 1997, 5) Wharton’s achievement in constructing a public identity for herself as a female author was considered to be a significant alteration of the public roles designated for the lady novelist of her time.

It would seem that the body of travel writings could have been included in the description of the construction of Wharton’s public identity as an author. As we know, by writing American travel books she took upon herself a position formerly filled by American men of letters, a position forbidden for lady novelists. It was exactly through the modification of the public roles of the lady novelist that she was able to write travel books. However, there is one specific problem with her newly forged public identity. Wharton the woman of letters seems an arch conservative in questions of gender and class. In other words she writes nonfiction to preserve the existing cultural and social status quo, so much so that in 1996 Frederick Wegener, the editor of a Wharton’s uncollected critical writing states that her criticism “does little to locate a genuinely feminine sensibility in it.” (Wegener 1996, 44) Also, Michael E. Nowlin argues along similar lines: “Wharton boldly set out to claim cultural authority on grounds long exclusively occupied by men ... in the public arena ... [but] showed no eagerness to challenge the bifurcation of culture along gendered (as well as class) lines.” (Nowlin 1998, 446) It seems the female subversive potential in Wharton cannot be readily reconciled with her public identity.

On the basis of this opposition one is tempted to ask whether she was modern or conservative, feminist or not. Yet these questions cut us off from the achievements of her work. It is more useful to look at her output in terms of what it does, not in terms of what it is like. In this sense, as Nancy Bentley puts it, we can look at Wharton’s work as “neither culturally subversive nor apologist; rather [let us look at how] it effects a new representation of the sphere of culture itself in order to articulate, circulate, and finally acculturate the shocks of the modern.” (Bentley 1995a, 50) So in *Italian Villas*, the task is not to point out the

incompatibility of the feminist sensibility and the public identity. Rather, the task is to explicate how the text represents the sphere of culture and how it articulates the shocks of the modern (Bentley 1995b, 5).

## **2. Architecture as metaphor in Wharton's early fiction**

Architecture “remained an important metaphor for writing for Wharton throughout her life,” as Amy Kaplan claims. “For her, the achievement of architectural form in her novels is related to her sense of attaining the status of the professional author” (Kaplan 78–79). But how can one attain the status of the professional author? Kaplan maintains that Wharton created for herself the status of the professional female author and rejected the traditional role designated for a female author, the status of the amateur lady novelist. The 19th c lady novelist produces popular, sentimental texts for a domestic female audience. Instead, the professional female author aims at leaving the topics of the domestic sphere and adapting herself to the concerns and methods of professional male authors. To illuminate this dilemma of Wharton's, I suggest that we have a look at a section from her 1893 short story titled “The Fulness of Life” and compare the architectural metaphor of writing there to a similar one by Henry James in order to visualize the new problems of the professional author Wharton faces at the beginning of her career.

In her short story, Wharton relies on an architectural metaphor to illuminate the way the female psyche works and is expressed. The frame narrative of the story is quite simple. An intelligent, cultured woman dies and is happy to find herself in Heaven. Upon entry, she is interrogated about her life and relation with her husband, and from the interview it turns out they never had much in common intellectually speaking, as the husband was never able to comprehend the spiritual joys or sorrows of his impressionable wife. At the beginning of the tale, the woman describes her relationship to her husband in architectural terms, and relies on the image I wish to focus on now. As the conversation goes:

“And yet you were fond of your husband?” [the Spirit asked.]

“You have hit upon the exact word; I was fond of him, yes, just as I was fond of my grandmother, and the house that I was born in, and my old nurse. Oh, I was fond of him, and we were counted a very happy couple. But I have sometimes thought that a woman's nature is like a great house full of rooms: there is the hall, through which everyone passes in going in and out; the drawing-room, where one receives formal visits; the

sitting-room, where the members of the family come and go as they list; but beyond that, far beyond, are other rooms, the handles of whose doors perhaps are never turned; no one knows the way to them, no one knows whither they lead; and in the innermost room, the holy of holies, the soul sits alone and waits for a footstep that never comes."

"And your husband," asked the Spirit, after a pause, "never got beyond the family sitting-room?"

"Never," she returned, impatiently; "and the worst of it was that he was quite content to remain there. (Wharton 1893, sec. 2)

The description of a woman's nature as a house with public and private spaces provides a visual representation of the inaccessibility of the female 'soul.' Even the husband, the prioritized male enters the communal rooms only. It is only the public spaces that are accessible for him: not because the inner chambers are closed but because he feels no need to access them.

This visual metaphor of the female soul by Wharton is strikingly similar to Henry James's image of the chamber of the mind the novelist is to represent. As James maintains:

Experience is never limited and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web, of the finest silken threads, suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative—much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius—it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations. (James 1984, 52)

For James the chamber of the mind is the site where the process of experience happens. The good novelist is after the representation of this process. According to James, French realist novelists fall off the mark because they fail to enter this chamber, they do not even enter the house (of a person's nature).

Let us compare the two images of the 'soul' and its accessibility, Wharton's version of the room of the soul and James's chamber of the mind. The main structures of the houses, their architectural designs are identical. In the center one finds the room of the soul, the most important and most private space of the building. For James, the room is accessible, but only for those applying the right means: for novelists interested in psychological introspection and not in empirical sensory details of human life. In other words, access is provided for psychological novelists and not for realist authors. For Wharton, the same question of accessibility is

posed along gender lines. In her version it is specifically the female soul that awaits its male visitor. Also, the male visitor never gets access to the precious chamber. So for Wharton it is the prioritized male who fails to enter the room of the female soul, the analogue of the realist novelist in James.

Let us go a step further and read Wharton's architectural metaphor as a metaphor of writing similar to James's, as Kaplan also suggested. The main concern being the expression of the life of the female soul, it is indicated its space can never be explored by a male visitor. If we read the room-visitor duality in terms of James's code, i. e. as a subject matter and novelist duality, then Wharton's image poses a concern about the novelistic methods that are needed for an exploration of the female soul in a novel. The male novelist and his methods do not suffice in conveying the contents of the female soul, at least not by the realist method. But would Wharton accept a psychologizing novelist, James's ideal, as fit for entry?

If we go on reading the story, we get an ambiguous answer, a yes, no, maybe so. In Heaven, the woman does find a male partner who is able to comprehend her thoughts and emotions, yet she decides not to go for him but to wait for her husband to accompany her in eternity. So yes, there are ways to express the female soul. Yet the female soul does not want to be expressed and reverts to its original isolated position. How are we to take this ambiguity? Why does the woman prefer her isolated condition to one of communication and partnership?

At this point we can return to the question of professional authorship Wharton's architectural metaphors are supposed to be linked to. It is the woman who, despite former claims, prevents the male visitor from entering the room of her soul. The idea of women's sphere as separate, linked to the domestic interior of the house is the one problematized here. Is women's sphere really separate from men's, or is this separation being kept up by women authors themselves? The ironic ending of the short story would suggest the artificiality of the divide and also a criticism of the intelligent lady novelist who keeps up the division by intentionally not sharing her experience with male partners. A professional female author is unlike the lady novelist, as her main concern is to allow communication between the male and female spheres, even at the cost of the loss of the idea of a separate female sphere. So for Wharton the metaphor of architecture is connected to her aim to create the position

of the professional author at the crossroads of former male and female traditions of writing.

### **3. Interior Architecture: Architecture and interior decoration in *The Decoration of Houses***

The theme of architecture is the main concern of Wharton's nonfiction texts, too. In the next sections, let us have a look at how she involves the concept of architecture into her texts on interior decoration and gardening.

*The Decoration of Houses* starts out with professing the architectural principle underlying the field of interior decoration. As Wharton starts out "Rooms may be decorated in two ways: by a superficial application of ornament totally independent of structure, or by means of those architectural features which are part of the organism of every house, inside as well as out." (1) The contrast between decoration as superficial ornament versus decoration as structural element has come into being as late as the 19th century, when a division of labor between the work of the architect and the work of the decorator took place. Wharton professes that the art of interior decoration is comprehended only if one thinks of interior decoration as it was conceived of until the 19th century, as a branch of architecture (2), or as house architecture (140). So the keyword to interior decoration is architectural treatment in all areas.

Yet what does an architectural treatment mean in practice, for the areas covered in the different chapters? The book has dull-sounding chapters like: walls, doors, windows, fireplaces, ceilings and floors, hall and stairs, different kinds of rooms (gala, morning, library, dining, bed, school), *bric à brac*. Perhaps it is easier to see how the placement and size of doors, windows, and fireplaces should depend on architectural proportion, simplicity, and the needs of the inmates. Yet how, Wharton asks, does one find the link between these principles and the decoration of bedroom carpets? She finds the answer stating that "in the composition of the whole there is no negligible entity" (192), as in all areas the supreme excellence is simplicity, harmony, and proportion.

Wharton bases her positive belief in the architectural treatment on two presuppositions: first, on her belief in the reliability of the historical method and second, on her belief in an innate sense of beauty. First, she

maintains that an understanding of the historically changing functions of rooms is needed for the application of the right decoration. In her explanations she continually refers to the fact that the present vulgar American style of interior decoration shows deficiencies mainly because it does not understand the proper functions of the rooms and the decorations. It is a historical knowledge of changes of functions in the English middle-class house or in the aristocratic town residence that is needed not to mix functions when planning today. For instance, the gala rooms are not separate from the private apartments in American homes. The historical reason for this is that the American house is the enlargement of the *maison bourgeoise* and of the English middle class house, not the aristocratic county seat or the town residence, where gala rooms had been necessary and a different planning was needed. In Italian Renaissance palaces the private apartment called '*mezzanin*' was placed in a separate portion of the palace, an intermediate story that was formed by building some very high studded salons and of lowering the ceiling of adjoining rooms, thus creating intermediate rooms. (7) In fact, due to changes of lifestyles, the architectural decoration of the renaissance private apartment is of more interest to decorators today than the enormous public spaces of the same palaces.

As the second presupposition of her belief in the architectural method, she accepts the existence an innate sense of beauty. For her, it is a vital part of life like other civic virtues. Her idea is that one has a feeling for beauty that awakens in childhood already. This sense can be cultivated—the schoolroom of a child should provide an environment that develops this sense of beauty. Cultivation here means the development of those habits of observation and comparison that are the base of all sound judgements. (175) With the study of art we learn to observe and compare, aesthetic criteria that are elements of culture and make art a factor of civilization. From this perspective the habit of regarding art as a thing apart from life is fatal to the development of taste, and indirectly, to civilization.

In sum, *The Decoration* criticizes the opposition between spaces inside and outside the house, and also points out the historical changes of the architectural functions linking them. Wharton finds a basis contra historical change in an innate human sense for beauty, observation and reflection.



#### **4. Exterior architecture: The architecture of the garden in *Italian Villas and their Gardens***

In *Italian Villas*, architecture appears as the larger rule behind Italian garden magic invisible for the everyday American perceiver. A harmony of design is based on the rule that the garden must be studied in relation to the house, and both in relation to the landscape. (6) For Wharton, the garden is in effect a prolongation of the house with its own logical functional divisions. It is related to the landscape in its orientation, and in using the natural building materials and plants of the region. Wharton again works with an opposition when she formulates the architectural principle for garden-art. She contrasts the architecturally designed Renaissance or Baroque Italian garden to the English garden of the landscapist school that wishes to blend the garden with the landscape. Historically, the landscape school is responsible for the alteration of several Italian Renaissance gardens into English parks from the mid-18th century on, in essence for a national forgetfulness about functions of the garden space even in Italy since the 18th century.

Armed with this quasi structuralist intention of locating the deep structure of Italian garden magic, Wharton the scientist also lists the basic units necessary for the transformational laws she has identified. There are three basic materials the Italian gardener uses to achieve his goals: marble, water, and perennial verdure because these are the materials the climate/location offers. The garden of the Italian villa consists of the following elements: shady walks, sunny bowling greens, parterres, (rose arbour) orchards, woodland shade, terraces, sheltered flower and/or herb garden, waterworks. Enlisting the ingredients, Wharton is on the lookout for the architectural principle in every villa-garden-landscape relation she presents. She mentions the position of the villa on the property, she identifies the separate functional parts of the garden and their relations to the house, respectively.

Let me give you a delicious example of what exactly all these elements are and of how they can be harmoniously placed according to the three rules above. The case in point is the Villa Gamberaia, 10 miles from Florence, with the main lines of a small but perfect Renaissance garden from the 16th century. The house is situated on a slope overlooking valley of the Arno and the village, and Florence can also be seen at a distance. In front of the façade of the house there is a grassy terrace bounded by a low wall which overhangs the vineyards and the

fields. To the two sides of the villa there are two balustrades, one leading to the chapel, the other to an oblong garden with a pond and symmetrical parterres. Behind the villa, running parallel with it, is a long grass alley or bowling green flanked for part of its length by a retaining wall set with statues and for the remainder by high hedges, closing it off from the oblong garden. The alley is closed on one end by a grotto, a fountain. At the opposite end (behind the oblong garden) it terminates in a balustrade whence one looks down on the Arno. The retaining wall of the bowling green sustains a terrace planted with cypress and ilex and on the other end a lemon house with a small garden. The wall is broken opposite the entrance of the house and a gate leads to a small garden with grotto. Two flights of stairs lead up to the terrace from here. In Wharton's admiring commentary:

The plan of the Gamberaia has been described thus in detail because it combines in an astonishingly small space,...., almost every typical excellence of the old Italian garden: free circulation of sunlight and air about the house; abundance of water; easy access to dense shade; sheltered walks with different points of view; variety of effect produced by the skilful use of different levels; and, finally, breadth and simplicity of composition. (46)

Wharton's task as a guide is most challenging when she visits run down gardens that look like enchanted forests for the innocent eye. She herself can only identify the parts by relying on her foreknowledge of typical functions, ingredients, and plants used.

In her analysis, Wharton again manifests her belief in the value of historical knowledge of changes of functions in garden space. It is not only that she criticizes the way the landscapist school blots out former traditions of garden design, making geometric lines seem ugly for visitors. She also wishes to acquaint her readers with subsequent styles of art history from Gothic through Renaissance and Baroque, contrasting these to Romanticism. She leads her readers through seven regions of Italy: regions around Florence, Siena, Rome, Rome itself, Geneva, Milan, and Venice, but these can in fact be seen as two tours, one a tour of mainly Renaissance architecture (chapters 1–4) and one a tour of mainly Baroque architecture (chapters 5–7).

Also, she provides commentary on the historiography of art. She often mentions the way other guidebooks comment on the given site, and locates the reasons for preference or dislike. A case in point is the reception of Isola Bella on Lake Maggiore in Lombardy. Baroque

travelers admired its geometry and artifice. Yet in the mid 18th century a counterreaction set in: visitors with a taste for the artificial naturalism of the English landscape school found the frank artificiality of Isola Bella frightening. Commenting on the different judgments, Wharton states that these two preferences are still present in discussions of art, although it would be more useful to reflect on the artificiality of artistic conventions themselves instead of taking sides. "The time has come, however, when it is recognized that both these manners are manners, one as artificial as the other, and each to be judged ... by its own aesthetic merit." (205) To my mind, this view allows for the existence of simultaneous but possibly incompatible manners or styles of art.

Apart from the need to reflect on historical discontinuity and the artificiality of styles, there is also a third aspect to be regarded by the art-historian, the aspect of race. In an aside Wharton characterizes Italian architecture as somewhat out of step with classicism in European art and reverting to medieval images.

This Italian reversion to the grotesque, at a time when it was losing fascination for the Northern races, might form the subject of an interesting study of *race aesthetics*. When the coarse and sombre fancy of mediaeval Europe found expression in grinning gargoyles and baleful or buffoonish images, Italian art held serenely to the beautiful..., but in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the classical graces had taken possession of Northern Europe, the chimerical animals... reappeared in the queer fauna of Italian grottoes and ... garden-walk(s). (234, emphasis mine)

In other words in the formation and appearance of art traditions or *manners* seem to be influenced by racial characteristics, too. To read this along with the previous considerations of the meta-historian, diverse races come with diverse histories of art each to be understood as a sign system in itself, possibly incompatible with each other.

In sum, *Italian Villas* manifests an interest in the architectural principles of garden design with an eye to the relation of inside and outside, house and space, but at the same time also stresses that one acknowledges the historicity of garden constructs and the artificiality or constructedness of artistic manners, and realizes the role of national (as she puts it: race) characteristics in the appearance of artistic manners.

Conclusion: Wharton's approach to culture and history in her early nonfiction work

Having looked at the role of architecture in Wharton's early short story, in her work on interior decoration, and on Italian garden design, let us consider the differences in its use. In the short story the opposition of the male exterior and female interior space was criticized and the chance of revealing the inner space of the soul with the psychologizing, already existing male method was opened for the professional female novelist. In *The Decoration*, the importance of the architectural method in the design of decorations, the mixing of the difference between inside and outside was stressed, but at the same time the historical changes of spatial functions was pointed out, balanced by a belief in man's innate sense of beauty as part of everyday life. In *Italian Villas*, exterior architecture of the garden space was in focus, a criticism of the opposition between inside and out in that outer spaces were shown to have their roomlike functions and proportions. At the same time, the importance of a historical knowledge of changing functions was joined by a new awareness of the artificiality, the constructedness of artistic manners. So the initial deconstruction of the opposition between inside and outside in the short story was first amended by an awareness of the historically changing relation between inside and outside, yet all this was treated as the manifestation of a an innate sense of beauty in man in general. Eventually, this belief in an innate sense of beauty disappeared in *Italian Villas* to be replaced by manners and race, a culturally constructed basis for historical change.

In view of this, I think we indeed need to extend Kaplan's gender oriented approach to architecture in Wharton's early work. Architecture bridges the divide between inside and outside, private and public, female and male spaces, and can be a metaphor of professional female writing. Yet, Wharton's awareness of the historicity of the inside-outside relation and her eventual reflection on the cultural construction of artistic manners indicates that Wharton the cultural critic uses architecture as a metaphor of cultural construction, in her words, of civilization. Eventually reflecting on how this articulates the shock of the modern, one can state that between 1894 and 1905 her theoretical frame of reference changed so much that by *Italian Villas* she could reflect on the cultural construction of artistic manners, an idea that was probably deeply at war with her innate belief in an innate human sense of beauty she discussed in *The Decoration*.

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