"The Intolerable Ugliness of New York": Architecture and Society in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*

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Edith Wharton's novel *The Age of Innocence* was written in and about an era characterized in the United States by immense political, economic, and cultural change, which led many Americans to reevaluate how they defined their country and themselves. As an expatriate, Wharton worked on the manuscript in France in the years just after World War I amidst ongoing debates about the Treaty of Versailles, wartime reparations, and the creation of the League of Nations. The work was received by the American public first in the summer of 1920, when it appeared in serial form in the magazine *Pictorial Review*, and again later that fall, when it was published as a novel. The story was set almost fifty years earlier in the New York and Newport, Rhode Island, of Wharton's youth. Through her descriptions of that earlier period's built environment and social conventions, Wharton drew conclusions about American society that carried added weight in her own day. Wharton's assessment of architecture, interior design, and codes of conduct in late-nineteenth-century America distanced her from many of her American contemporaries by demonstrating her disillusionment with her increasingly influential homeland.

From the conclusion of the Civil War to the conclusion of World War I, Americans saw their country transformed. At the beginning of the period, the United States was still recovering from the destruction and division that resulted from sectional crisis. Violent conflicts with American Indians regularly threat-

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ened the migration of white Americans to seemingly unsettled land in the interior of the country. Optimistic claims of progress and manifest destiny were tempered for many Americans by a need to rebuild and simply endure. By the turn of the century, however, the nation spanned the entire continent and was increasingly urban and industrial. It had begun to build an empire, like its imperialist European counterparts, by acquiring possessions in both the Caribbean and the Pacific. Over the next two decades, the United States would continue to expand its involvement in foreign affairs. In 1917, the country officially entered the first World War, a conflict that until that point had been waged by ambitious European powers. After delivering victory to the weary Allies, American leaders debated the proper role their now-vital country should play in maintaining peace in Europe and ultimately the world.

As in any era of significant change, the United States' transition from a nation torn by internal strife to one contemplating its powerful position in the new world order caused many Americans to rethink how they characterized themselves and their country. An obsession with national identity, which created a renewed desire to define America's unique qualities, spread throughout much of the United States during both the late-nineteenth- and the early-twentieth-centuries. In 1876, Americans proudly celebrated the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of their country with a Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. Seventeen years later many traveled to Chicago to attend the Columbian Exposition, which belatedly marked the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus's discovery of America.

Along with the revived sense of national enthusiasm signaled by fairs commemorating America's beginnings and extolling the virtues of the country's industrial development and geographic expansion came a desire among many Americans to reassess the relationship between Europe and the United States. In the past, Europe had generally been envisioned as a cultural center with rich and long-standing civil, religious, and artistic traditions. The United States, on the other hand, was believed by many to be lagging behind in expressions of true civilization, particularly in its art, architecture, and literature. This attitude began to change in the post-Civil War period. In his 1869 travel book *Innocents Abroad*, for example, Mark Twain reported after visiting Rome that St. Peter's Cathedral was neither as large nor as beautiful as the United States Capitol. More generally he remarked of the European art he and his travel companions had observed in France, Spain, and Italy, "[we] praised it if we saw fit, and if we didn't we said we preferred the wooden Indians in front of the cigar stores in America."[1]

Among many architects and interior designers working in the United States in the late-nineteenth century, this reevaluation of the relative merits of European and American design led to a new desire to create buildings that were distinctly American. The decades immediately preceding and succeeding the Civil War—generally known as the Victorian period—were largely marked in

American architecture by the emergence and reemergence of numerous historical revivals based on European styles and regional traditions. The end result was often a structure that was characterized by the simultaneous use of architectural elements and furnishings representing the fashions of several different times and places. By the last decades of the nineteenth century, professional architects began to abhor this eclecticism. A. D. F. Hamlin, a professor of architecture and architectural history at Columbia University, cautioned readers of the *Architectural Record* against the "intentional mixing of incongruous styles," while Boston architect Robert Swain Peabody warned fellow designers not to add yet another fashion to a room that already contained a neo-Jacobean table, Eastlake chairs, a Rococo mantel, and a Puginesque sideboard.[2]

According to many American architects, the hodgepodge of European historical and regional styles that pervaded American design had to be replaced by a style that was truly American. Suggestions for improvement tended to focus on two sources of inspiration: early American buildings and the American natural landscape. Some designers, such as Peabody, contended that the seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and early-nineteenth-century buildings of the east coast, particularly those of New England, were the ideal source for a revitalized architecture in the United States. In the late-1870s, the architect-author asked readers of the *American Architect and Building News*, "With our Centennial year have we not discovered that we too have a past worthy of study?" According to Peabody and his cohorts, colonial buildings—often defined in the late-nineteenth century as structures built in America prior to the emergence of the Greek revival style in the 1820s—provided Americans with their "only native source of antiquarian study and inspiration."[3] Other American architects, less concerned with historical precedent and more concerned with spontaneous creation "in sympathy with the emotions" of the American people, looked westward and to the natural environment for artistic stimulation. Louis Sullivan, for example, after remarking in the *Inland Architect and Builder* on the parade of styles utilized by American designers, concluded that a national style would eventually emerge not from the study of earlier American buildings but "from out [of] the very treasury of nature."©[4]

Edith Wharton challenged professional designers from Peabody to Sullivan with her own ideas for improving the late-nineteenth-century architecture of the United States. Perhaps best known for her novels and short stories, Wharton also wrote numerous nonfiction travel accounts rich in architectural detail and a widely read treatise, *The Decoration of Houses*, on designing and furnishing interior domestic spaces (figure 1). In the latter work, co-authored with architect Ogden Codman, Jr., Wharton insisted that American architects look not to early American buildings or to the American landscape for proper architectural models but rather to Europe. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Wharton did not endorse the creation of a distinct American aesthetic. Instead, to alleviate the "labyrinth of dubious eclecticism" that characterized Victorian American archi-

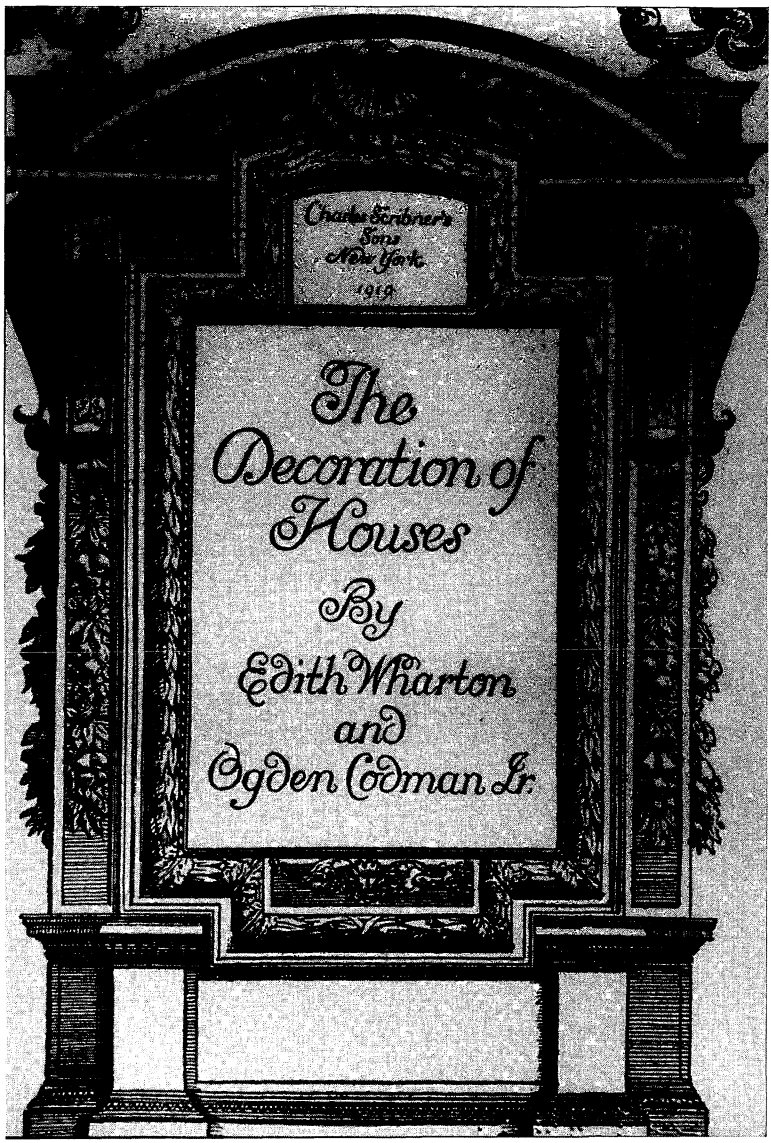

Figure 1: Title page of Edith Wharton's *Decoration of Houses* (1897; New York, 1919).

tecture, she favored the recreation in America of unmodified European forms. She described the "styles especially suited to modern [American] life . . . as those prevailing in Italy since 1500, in France from the time of Louis XIV, and in England since the introduction of the Italian manner by Indigo Jones."[5]

Of the three architectural styles she advocated, Wharton was most fond of French designs based on classical models. In *The Decoration of Houses*, she and Codman observed, "France will long retain her present superiority in these arts [of architecture and decoration]." They continued, "In Paris . . . it is impossible to take even a short walk without finding inspiration in those admirable buildings, public and private, religious and secular, that bear the stamp of the most refined taste the world has known since the decline of the arts in Italy." Unlike American designers, Wharton and Codman believed French architects had "never quite lost sight" of the fact that architecture and decoration could "be set right only by a close study of the best models."[6]

The authors' belief in French supremacy in architecture and interior design was clearly evidenced in the introduction to *The Decoration of Houses*, in which they wrote that "No study of *house-decoration as a branch of architecture* has for at least fifty years been published in England or America," [yet] "France is always producing admirable monographs on isolated branches of this subject." The hierarchical arrangement of the list of books consulted, immediately following the table of contents and list of plates in *The Decoration of Houses*, reflected this failure on the part of the English and the Americans, as well as the authors' partiality toward French works. It listed first 33 French treatises on art, architecture, and interior decoration; then 21 English volumes; and finally 10 German and Italian works. Likewise, more than half of the 56 illustrations included in the book were reproductions of French prints (figure 2) or photographs of French furniture or French interiors.[7]

Wharton's positive assessment of French architecture and decorative arts was not limited to *The Decoration of Houses* or her other works of nonfiction. Addressing potential authors in *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton contended that "character and scenic detail" were "in fact one" in the best novels. She believed that the "impression produced by a landscape, a street or a house should always, to the novelist, be an event in the history of the soul."[8] In her own fictional works, Wharton carefully correlated her characters' social standing and behavior with the built environment they inhabited. In her best-known novel, *The Age of Innocence*, she repeatedly contrasted characters who preferred eclectic American buildings furnished with American antiques to those who opted for foreign, particularly French, designs. Not surprisingly, Wharton condemned those who fit into the former category while championing those in the latter.

In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton used architectural representations as clear guideposts for interpreting the society about which she wrote. The author characterized late-nineteenth-century America, where the novel was set, as "a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs."[9] As she created this world on paper, Wharton was clearly limited in the type of signs she could use to represent her characters and their society. By fixing *The Age of Innocence* in the recent past in specific locations, she could not stray too far from reality. Yet, as a novelist, Wharton could make explicit the kind of subtle distinctions not

Figure 2: "French Boudoir, Louis XVI Period (From a Print by Le Bouteux)." Plate 41 in Edith Wharton's *Decoration of Houses* (1897; New York, 1919).

always obvious in the real world where personal tastes could muddle larger artistic and cultural patterns. Moreover, she could manipulate the symbolic system to explain not only what was happening in the fictional setting of the book but also to consider events from her own vantage point. By contrasting the ar-

chitectural code to which her characters subscribed with her own beliefs about appropriate architectural models, Wharton used descriptions of the built environment to pass judgment on the society she depicted in *The Age of Innocence*.

At first reading, Wharton's architectural portraits may seem only accolades to landmarks of a former age—the New York brownstones along Fifth Avenue and the early mansions of Newport, Rhode Island, for example. Many readers initially took Wharton's architectural descriptions and cultural commentary at face value. Rather than interpreting *The Age of Innocence* as a critique of American values, they accepted it as nostalgia. When the book received the Pulitzer Prize in 1921, for example, it was judged the American novel that best presented "the wholesome atmosphere of American life and the highest standard of American manners and manhood."[10] The award committee understood the work as a glorification rather than an indictment of the Victorian period's social and artistic standards.

Much of Wharton's published nonfiction, however, suggests a different interpretation than the one advanced by the Pulitzer Prize committee. When writing about America generally, and her childhood in New York in particular, Wharton was often less than flattering. In her autobiography *A Backward Glance* (1934), she criticized nineteenth-century American society for its "pathetic picturesqueness."[11] In her book *French Ways and Their Meaning* (1919), she repeatedly condemned Americans, particularly before World War I, for their reliance on every "sham and substitute" and "short-cut" to knowledge, education, literature, and art.[12] Such commentaries suggest that Wharton conceived *The Age of Innocence* as a critique rather than a positive appraisal of earlier American attitudes, aesthetics, and customs.

In private correspondence, Wharton was more explicit about her intentions in writing *The Age of Innocence*. She wrote to Bernard Berenson, "I *did* so want 'The Age' to be taken not as a 'costume piece' but as a 'simple & grave' story of two people trying to live up to something that was still 'felt in the blood' at that time."[13] In regard to the Pulitzer Prize, she wrote Sinclair Lewis, "when I discovered that I was being rewarded—by one of our leading Universities—for uplifting American morals, I confess I *did* despair."[14]

Although some critics have insisted that *The Age of Innocence* was primarily a reflection on earlier and easier times,[15] much evidence—notably that concerning Wharton's descriptions of art, architecture, and interior decoration—suggests otherwise. In the novel about Newland Archer's struggle to choose between his chaste and proper fiancee and later wife May Welland and her cousin, the alluring and free-thinking Countess Ellen Olenska, Wharton conveyed clear messages about the squelching effect of American morals, particularly on women. Although in the novel Archer chose Welland and upheld popular convention, Wharton used the book to question the merit of America's late-Victorian values and conventions. She relied on architectural descriptions in her text to convey her disillusionment with those like Archer and Welland who refused to look beyond the insular community of which they were part.

According to one of the characters in *The Age of Innocence*, fashionable New York society in the 1870s could be characterized as a three-tiered pyramid. At the apex were a handful of families that could "claim an aristocratic origin in the real sense of the word." A "compact and dominant group" of families who were descended from "respectable English or Dutch merchants" formed the middle stratum. At the base of the pyramid were the "wealthy but inconspicuous" "plain people," who had often been "raised above their level by marriage with one of the ruling clans" (48-49).

Not surprisingly, architecture proved one way to differentiate members of the various strata. For example, Henry and Louisa van der Luyden, who represented the novel's true aristocrats, owned a "large solemn house" on fashionable Madison Avenue (50). According to the protagonist Newland Archer, the large, "high-ceilinged white-walled" drawing room of this dwelling was "so complete an image of its owners" (51, 54). Yet the van der Luydens did not flaunt their Madison Avenue house. In fact, they were rarely in New York City. Instead, the van der Luydens preferred to divide their time between two family estates, which clearly demonstrated their long-standing elite positions: the first, Trevenna, a Maryland plantation named for Louisa van der Luyden's great-grandmother Lady Angelica (Trevenna) du Lac, the daughter of the Earl of St. Austrey; the second, Skuytercliff, a "great estate on the Hudson which had been one of the colonial grants of the Dutch government to the famous first Governor" (50).

Members of the middle stratum of *The Age of Innocence*'s social pyramid, such as Newland Archer's and May Welland's families, were not able to escape to such noteworthy country estates. Most summered in Newport, Rhode Island, in the "square boxes on the cliffs" (206). But come October, they all returned to their New York City homes. There they conformed to the strict architectural rules that governed a proper New York house. Such a dwelling had, for example, to be correctly situated in the fashionable district surrounding lower Fifth Avenue between Washington Square and Fortieth Street (figure 3). Strict adherence to this guideline caused one character, who resided outside the acceptable area, to note, "I've never been in a city where there seems to be such a feeling against living in *des quartiers excentriques*" (73). Another lamented, "No, no; not one of them wants to be different; they're as scared of it as the small-pox" (152).

The architectural uniformity exhibited by this group, whether brought on by a fear of difference or a reverence for tradition, extended beyond the choice of a building site. The use of building materials was also controlled by an unspoken code. In old New York, "brown sandstone seemed as much the only wear as a frock-coat in the afternoon" (12). Its "uniform hue coated New York like a cold chocolate sauce" (71). The consistency of elite housing practices was so great that Wharton could write of this layer of society as a single entity. She noted, "Every year on the fifteenth of October Fifth Avenue opened its shutters,

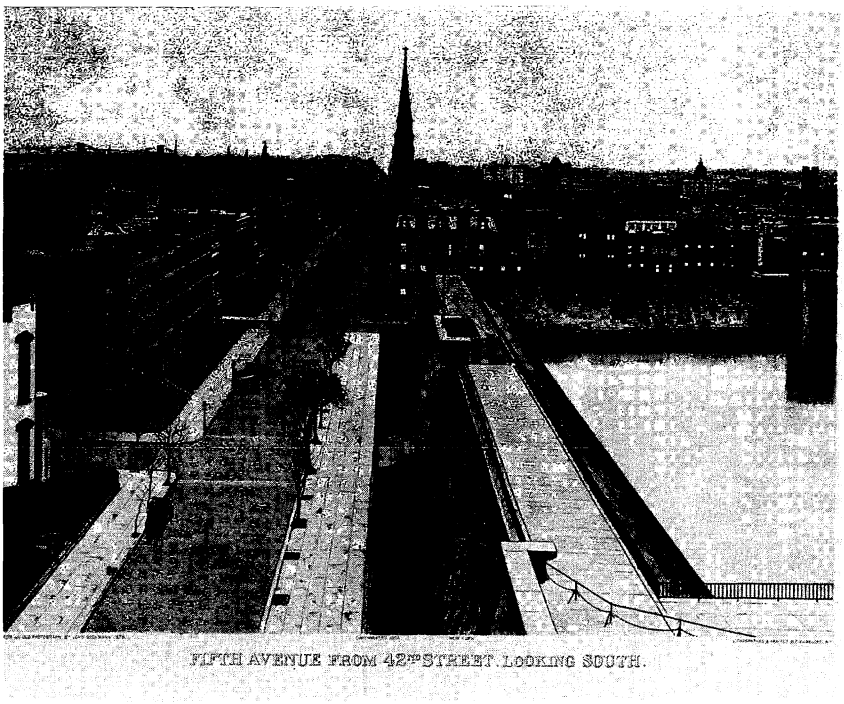

Figure 3: "Fifth Avenue From 42nd Street, Looking South. From an Old Photograph by John Bachman 1879." Chromolithograph by Robert A. Welcke, copyrighted 1904. The large structure in the right foreground is the Croton Reservoir. The brownstone houses Edith Wharton described in *The Age of Innocence* and other works can be seen in this image on the left, or east, side of Fifth Avenue. *Courtesy of print collector, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.*

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unrolled its carpets and hung up its triple layer of window-curtains" in preparation for the winter season (255).

"Conformity to the discipline of a small society had become almost . . . second nature" for characters in *The Age of Innocence* such as Newland Archer (321). The "plain people" at the base of New York's social pyramid were less conventional. Some, such as Julius Beaufort, tried to rise above their station and outdo their social betters. Despite a mysterious past, Beaufort had married into "one of America's most honoured families" and, for a time, his "heavy brownstone palace" on lower Fifth Avenue was "the most distinguished house in New

York" (19). The "house was one of the few in New York that possessed a ball-room . . . and at a time when it was beginning to be thought 'provincial' to put a 'crash' over the drawing-room floor and move the furniture upstairs, the possession of a ball-room that was used for no other purpose . . . was felt to compensate for whatever was regrettable in the Beaufort past" (18).

Yet Beaufort's invasion of New York society and the characteristics of his house that those in more respectable circles found redeeming were only temporary. After he "failed discreditably" in business and "brought financial dishonour on his wife's family," Beaufort lost his position as one of New York's "pet common people" (18, 259). His house reflected his downfall. The building, which during balls had been "blazing with lights," sat "dark as the grave," with its once gay conservatory stretching "its dead-black bulk down the side street" (306).

Other members of the lowest tier of New York "society," namely women such as Countess Ellen Olenska and her grandmother Catherine Mingott, felt no need to humor or emulate those above them in the social hierarchy and, as a result, routinely broke the architectural rules so firmly ingrained among their social betters. The very fact that these two women, who lived outside male-dominated households, made their own decisions concerning their residences would have scandalized proper ladies, such as Newland Archer's mother and sister, who considered "architecture and painting as subjects for men" (34). The additional preference of both to live some distance from the fashionable district of lower Fifth Avenue made them even less acceptable.

Regarding the purchase of property on which to build, Catherine Mingott was "always indifferent to precedent and thrifty of purse" (212-213). In New York City, she constructed her dwelling "in an inaccessible wilderness near the Central Park" (12). "When I built this house," she remembered later, "you'd have thought I was moving to California! Nobody ever *had* built above Fortieth Street" (152). Even in Newport, Mingott had chosen the "unfashionable region" of "rocky moorland" west of Spring Street in which to build her summer *cottage-orné* (212).

Ellen Olenska, too, shunned conventional locations for her residence. She opted to live "far down West Twenty-third Street" in a house she rented from her "vagabond [Aunt] Medora" (66). Henry van der Luyden considered Olenska's neighborhood too "unpleasant" for his wife Louisa to visit, and fellow residents termed it a "slum" (88, 122). Even Olenska's grandmother Mingott "objected to her living in a 'Bohemian' quarter given over to 'people who wrote'" (103). Questions raised by Olenska's decision to reside there were only compounded by her choice to summer in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, rather than in Newport.

Through Wharton's use of architectural images, it would seem then that the author of *The Age of Innocence* affirmed the hierarchical nature of the old New York society she portrayed. As Wharton described it, the top level of society, represented by the van der Luydens, effortlessly set the standard for architectural propriety with their Madison Avenue house and multiple country estates.

Members of the middle tier, more concerned with maintaining their rank, carefully followed an architectural code that dictated everything from fashionable building sites to proper building materials to when a house should be opened for the winter season. Only the "plain people" at the bottom of the social hierarchy regularly broke with architectural tradition either by trying to rise above their station like Beaufort or, like Olenska and her grandmother Mingott, by refusing to yield to the "blind conformity to tradition" so common in their society (240).

Yet a careful reading of Wharton's architectural descriptions suggests that although individuals such as Olenska and Mingott lived at what proper old New Yorkers considered the margins of acceptability, these were the characters that Wharton actually respected. The author was ultimately able to undercut and invert the symbolic architectural system ascribed to by the novel's characters, as well as many real life Americans, by praising what they thought inappropriate and denouncing what they valued. In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton repeatedly described the New York residences of Olenska and Mingott as "foreign" or "French." She contrasted them with the houses of other old New York families, which she characterized as particularly American in design. The latter dwellings reinforced their owners' multigenerational relationship with America. The houses of these two women, on the other hand, demonstrated an increased reliance on continental European, particularly French, aesthetics that Wharton herself considered superior.

In *The Age of Innocence*, "the bold young widow" Catherine Mingott had "mingled freely in foreign society following the death of Manson Mingott, "the head of the wealthy Mingott line" (12, 13). When she returned to New York, "the intrepid woman," whose own family had been "mysteriously discredited," "put the crowning touch to her audacities by building a large house of pale cream-coloured stone," rather than brownstone, near Central Park (12, 28). Although her cream-colored house was "supposed to be modelled [*sic*] on the private hotels of the Parisian aristocracy," for old New York it was the wrong color, in the wrong place, and based on the wrong patterns (12-13). Although the Mingott house might have been perceived as a great accomplishment in Paris, it was completely inappropriate for New York City.

Wharton modeled Catherine Mingott's distinct, foreign architectural tastes after those of her father's cousin, Mary Mason Jones.[16] In a 1938 *Harper's Monthly* article entitled "A Little Girl's New York," Wharton wrote:

> Two of my father's cousins, Mrs. Mason Jones and Mrs. Colford Jones, bought up the last two blocks on the east side of Fifth Avenue . . . at the [Central] Park gates . . . our audacious Aunt Mary, who had known life at the Court of the Tuileries, erected her own white marble residence and a row of smaller dwellings of the same marble to lodge her progeny. The "Jones blocks" were so revolutionary that I doubt any

> subsequent architectural upheavals along that historic thoroughfare have produced a greater impression.[17]

Wharton contrasted Jones' real-life house (figure 4) and Mingott's fictional house with most residences in New York City. In "A Little Girl's New York," she compared the typical brownstone houses that lined Fifth Avenue (see figure 3) to "disciplined schoolgirls," and added, "The lives led behind the brownstone fronts were, with few exceptions, as monotonous as their architecture." She further recollected, "I have often sighed, in looking back at my childhood, to think

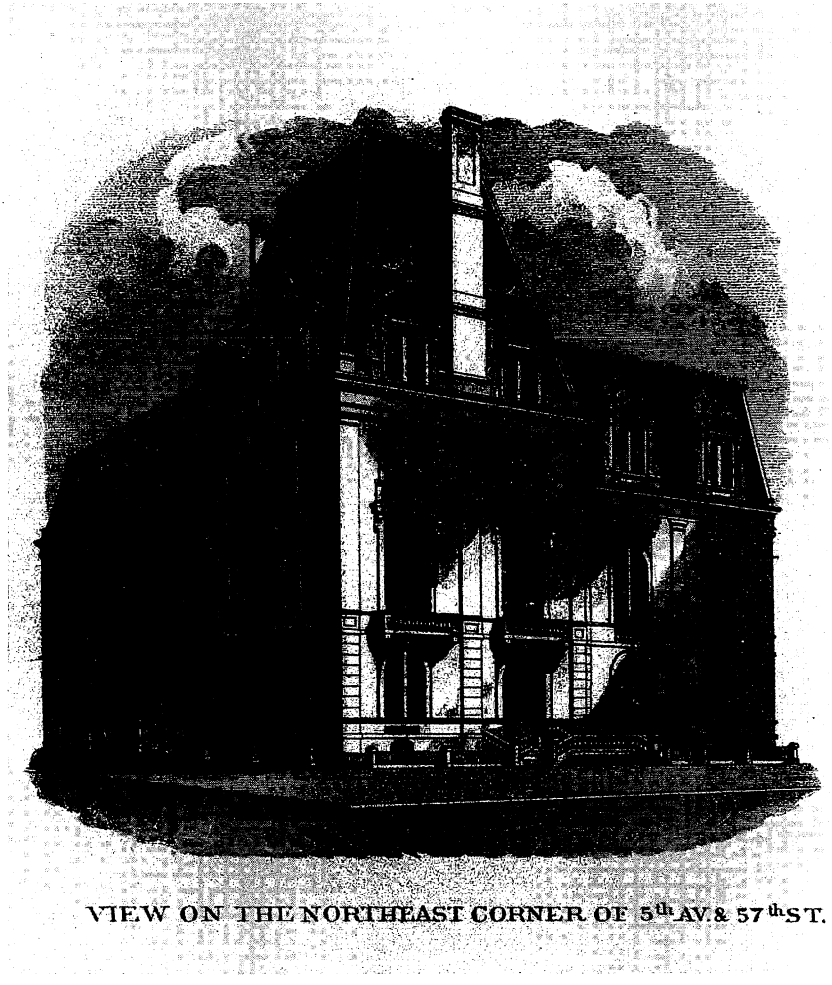

Figure 4: Mary Mason Jones residence, known as Marble Row, 1875. Fifth Avenue between Fifty-seventh and Fifty-eighth Streets, New York City. *Photograph courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York.*

how pitiful a provision was made for the life of the imagination behind those uniform brownstone facades. . . . Beauty, passion, and danger were automatically excluded."[18]

In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton described Catherine Mingott's New York house as "visible proof of her moral courage" (13). Despite "having been only Catherine Spicer of Staten Island," Mingott had married into a ruling New York family, wed two of her daughters to foreigners of "heaven knew what corrupt and fashionable circles, hobnobbed with Dukes and Ambassadors, associated familiarly with Papists, entertained Opera singers," and lived in a house that was completely out of place in America (12, 13). As Wharton described it, Mingott's daring was evidenced not only in her behavior and associations, but also in the European-ness of her home and the objects in it. Mingott furnished the offensive house by contrasting "pre-Revolutionary [presumably American] furniture" with "souvenirs of the Tuileries of Louis Napoleon (where she had shone in her middle age)" (13). She "bodily cast out the massive furniture of her prime, and mingled with the Mingott heirlooms the frivolous upholstery of the [French] Second Empire" (26).

Mingott had equally foreign, and in New York appalling, views about the ordering of interior space. In her middle years, an "immense accretion of flesh . . . had descended on her . . . like a flood of lava" (27). As a result, "with characteristic independence she had made her reception rooms upstairs and established herself (in flagrant violation of all the New York proprieties) on the ground floor of her house" (27). This created an awkward and risqué arrangement because "as you sat in her sitting-room window with her, you caught (through a door that was always open, and a looped-back yellow damask portière) the unexpected vista of a bedroom with a huge low bed upholstered like a sofa, and a toilet-table with frivolous lace flounces and a gilt-framed mirror" (27-28).

Not surprisingly, the scene reminded her visitors of "French fiction." Members of conservative New York society associated the foreign arrangement with "architectural incentives to immorality such as the simple American had never dreamed of. That was how women with lovers lived in the wicked old societies, in apartments with all the rooms on one floor, and all the indecent propinquities that their novels described" (28). Catherine Mingott knew that the perceived "foreignness" of her home distinguished it and her from the rest of old New York society. Mingott, however, chose to defy that society by insisting on being different. She confided to Newland Archer, "I thank my stars I'm nothing but a vulgar Spicer," and added sorrowfully, "but there's not one of my own children that takes after me but my little Ellen" (152).

Like her grandmother Mingott, the Countess Ellen Olenska showed a marked preference for foreign ways. Olenska was in fact born to "continental wanderers" and after their deaths was left to the care of her "wanderer" Aunt Medora (58). As May Welland's mother explained to her prospective son-in-law Newland Archer, "I'm afraid Ellen's ideas are not like ours. She was barely eighteen when Medora Manson took her back to Europe. . . . That must have been at least

twelve years ago; and since then Ellen has never been to America. No wonder she is completely Europeanised [*sic*]" (143-144).

Everything about Olenska signaled her foreignness. When she spoke, it was "as if she were translating from the French" (127). When she wrote a note to Newland Archer, he could not help "smiling a little at the Frenchness" of the phrasing (139). Even her dinner dress, "a long robe of red velvet bordered about the chin and down the front with glossy black fur," reminded Archer of a French portrait he had seen "by the new painter, Carolus Duran, whose pictures were the sensation of the Salon" in Paris (104).

Olenska's house and belongings also indicated her European tastes. Upon entering her drawing room, Newland Archer experienced "the faded shadowy charm of a room unlike any room he had known" (69).

> The atmosphere of the room was so different from any he had ever breathed that self-consciousness vanished in the sense of adventure. He had been before in drawing-rooms hung with red damask, with pictures "of the Italian school"; what struck him was the way in which Medora Manson's shabby hired house . . . had, by a turn of the hand, and the skilful [*sic*] use of a few properties, been transformed into something intimate, "foreign," subtly suggestive of old romantic scenes and sentiments. (70)

Olenska referred to her residence, so unlike anything else New York could offer, as a "funny house." She confided to Archer, "Oh, it's a poor little place. My relations despise it. But at any rate it's less gloomy than the van der Luydens" (72).

Unlike Mingott and Olenska, the van der Luydens shunned objects with foreign, particularly French, associations. Because Wharton characterized the fictional van der Luydens as "direct descendants of the first Dutch governor of Manhattan" who were "related by pre-revolutionary marriages to several members of the French and British aristocracy," she suggested that they had access to both European objects and ideas (49). However, the van der Luydens preferred American articles and incorporated European, often English or Dutch, antiques only when they were direct reflections of their long-standing new world heritage. Through their use of paintings, for example, the couple conspicuously traced their lineage to the United States' colonial era. In their New York drawing-room, Louisa van der Luyden's portrait by American artist Daniel Huntington was paired with a painting of her ancestress, Lady Angelica (Trevenna) du Lac, that was executed by the eighteenth-century English painter Thomas Gainsborough (51). However, the subject of the work had traded her old world identity for an American one: the noblewoman had left her Cornish homeland at the time of the American revolution to settle with her husband in Maryland.

While the van der Luydens could accept a European heirloom like the Gainsborough portrait as a symbolic decorative feature, they could not imagine living in a house based strictly on European models. Henry van der Luyden actually constructed the van der Luydens' house on their Hudson River estate in order to replace a seventeenth-century Dutch dwelling that had been part of the property for over two centuries. The design that the van der Luydens chose for their new house was based on the ambiguous European revival styles prominent in the United States during the Victorian era. According to Wharton, "People had always been told that the [van der Luydens'] house at Skuytercliff was an Italian villa. Those who had never been to Italy believed it; so did some who had" (129). However, in reality, the van der Luydens' new house, "with tongued and grooved walls painted pale green and white, a Corinthian portico, and fluted pilasters between the windows," was fundamentally an American interpretation based on vaguely Italian, or classical, designs (129).

The pseudo-Italian villa was actually a sign of a rejection, rather than an adoption, of European aesthetics. It was part of a larger ordered landscape that emphasized the recently erected, eclectic American house and down-played the older Dutch building on the property. As Wharton described the scene, the new, imposing villa "loomed up rather grimly" from its perch atop a mass of high ground. A "series of terraces bordered by balustrades and urns descended" from the house first to an irregular lake. Below the lake, the seventeenth-century dwelling lay defeated "in a hollow" (129). In *The Decoration of Houses*, Wharton argued "Colonial" structures like the van der Luyden's Dutch house were not distinctly American buildings as many patriotic antiquarians believed at the time but were instead "modest" but accurate copies of European models.[19] That the van der Luyden's Dutch house was superseded by a structure that bore only a cursory resemblance to true Italian designs demonstrated its owners' repudiation of things foreign.

For the van der Luydens, the old Dutch house was merely a minor component in the picturesque landscape of their estate. The building itself, with its "squat walls" and its "small square windows," was not meant to be accessible (132). In fact, the van der Luydens kept it locked and allowed very few people to see the "tiled hearth" and "rows of Delft plates" inside (132, 133, 190). If the building had a purpose for the van der Luydens, it was to remind visitors of the family's pre-Revolutionary heritage in America. The structure served as a symbol that Henry van der Luyden was descended from a long line of prominent New Yorkers and had, in fact, even inherited the official colonial title of "Patroon." Yet, despite its historic associations, the van der Luydens would not have considered residing in the old Dutch house or even incorporating its European flavor into the design of their new dwelling (50).

To the van der Luydens and particularly those respectable families who hoped to emulate them, it was the family's Madison Avenue residence and newly erected villa—not the old Dutch building—that functioned as symbols of suc-

cess. Newland Archer, for instance, could not help thinking of the Manhattan abode as "stately," knowing that those "privileged to enter it shivered there and spoke of it as 'handsome'" (72). In the Archer family's New York home, the van der Luyden's taste for American aesthetics and objects was mirrored. Newland Archer's mother and sister, for example, "collected American revolutionary glazed ware" (33).

To individuals like the character Ellen Olenska, who were constrained by the standards of old New York, the van der Luydens' residences had a different meaning. The Madison Avenue house and new villa on the Hudson were certainly not to be emulated. The van der Luyden's New York City dwelling seemed to Olenska a "gloomy" abode (72). And even their villa, which provided the Europeanized woman with an escape from the confines of urban life, reminded her of a "great seminary" (132). Olenska confided to her cousin May Welland that the van der Luydens' old Dutch house (figure 5) was the only house she had seen in America where "she could imagine being perfectly happy" (191). Ironically, in Wharton's view, this house was hardly American; the building where Olenska felt most at home in the United States was actually built by colonists who were primarily familiar with the houses of seventeenth-century Holland.

Throughout *The Age of Innocence*, foreign objects and designs continually distinguished the residences preferred by individuals who did not conform to the architectural and behavioral standards of the most elite members of old New York society. Even Julius Beaufort incorporated some European features into

Figure 5: Ellen Olenska and Newland Archer in the van der Luyden's old Dutch house. Engraving by W. B. King, *Pictorial Review*, September 1920: 25.

his Fifth Avenue home. Beaufort was noted for "his habit of two continents and two societies, his familiar association with artists and actors and people generally in the world's eye, and his careless contempt for local prejudices" (137). In the *bouton d'or* drawing room of his New York house, he "had the audacity to hang 'Love Victorious,' the much-discussed nude of [French artist William Adolphe] Bouguereau" (22) (figure 6). In Beaufort's summer house in Newport, the "foreign upstart" utilized "French windows that opened like doors instead of [the more customary] sashes that pushed up" (13, 205, 338). In New York, Catherine Mingott also made use of French windows (13). And she imagined that the cobblestone road in front of her isolated house would soon be "replaced by smooth asphalt, such as people reported having seen in Paris" (27).

By using American aesthetics to symbolize people who functioned within the codes of old New York society and European, particularly French, fashions to represent those who did not, Edith Wharton called into question the standards of old New York. In her own life, European, particularly French, attitudes and aesthetics were clearly preferred over American tastes and customs. In her 1919 book *French Ways and Their Meaning* (figure 7), which she described as a "little monument to the glory of France,"[20] Wharton concluded:

> as long as enriching life is more than preserving it, as long as culture is superior to business efficiency, as long as poetry and imagination and reverence are higher and more precious elements of civilisation [*sic*] than telephones or plumbing, as long as truth is more bracing than hypocrisy, and wit more wholesome than dulness [*sic*], so long will France remain greater than any nation that has not her ideals.[21]

One reason that Wharton gave such a strong endorsement to French culture and, consequently, French architecture concerned the powerful, mature positions she felt women were able to attain in that country. In a chapter entitled "The New Frenchwoman" in *French Ways and Their Meaning*, Wharton noted, "The Frenchwoman rules French life, and she rules it under a triple crown, as a business woman, as a mother, and above all as an artist." When comparing French and American women, Wharton commented that the French woman, who had "a larger and more liberal experience of life, [was] less concerned with trifles, and less afraid of strong feelings, passions, and risks, [played] a much larger and more interesting part in men's lives, [and was] distinctly more grown up than her American sister." She echoed these sentiments in her book *Fighting France: From Dunkerque to Belfort*, where she commented on "the extreme dignity and grace," "habitual cheerfulness," and "moral courage" that French women had shown during World War I.[22]

In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton made it clear that she did not think American women shared the positive characteristics of their French counterparts. "'Nice' women" in America did not want freedom, they shielded them-

Figure 6: William Aldolphe Bouguereau, *L'Amour vainqueur*, 1886. Photoengraving by Goupil and Company, *Salon de 1887: Cent Planches en Photogravure par Goupil & C^IE*, ed. Ludovic Baschet (Paris, 1887), following page 26.

selves from everything unpleasant, and they never spoke for themselves (43, 77, 81). The marriages into which they entered were "dull association[s] of material and social interests held together by ignorance" on their part "and hypocrisy" on their husbands' (44). The American wife, like May Welland, "would

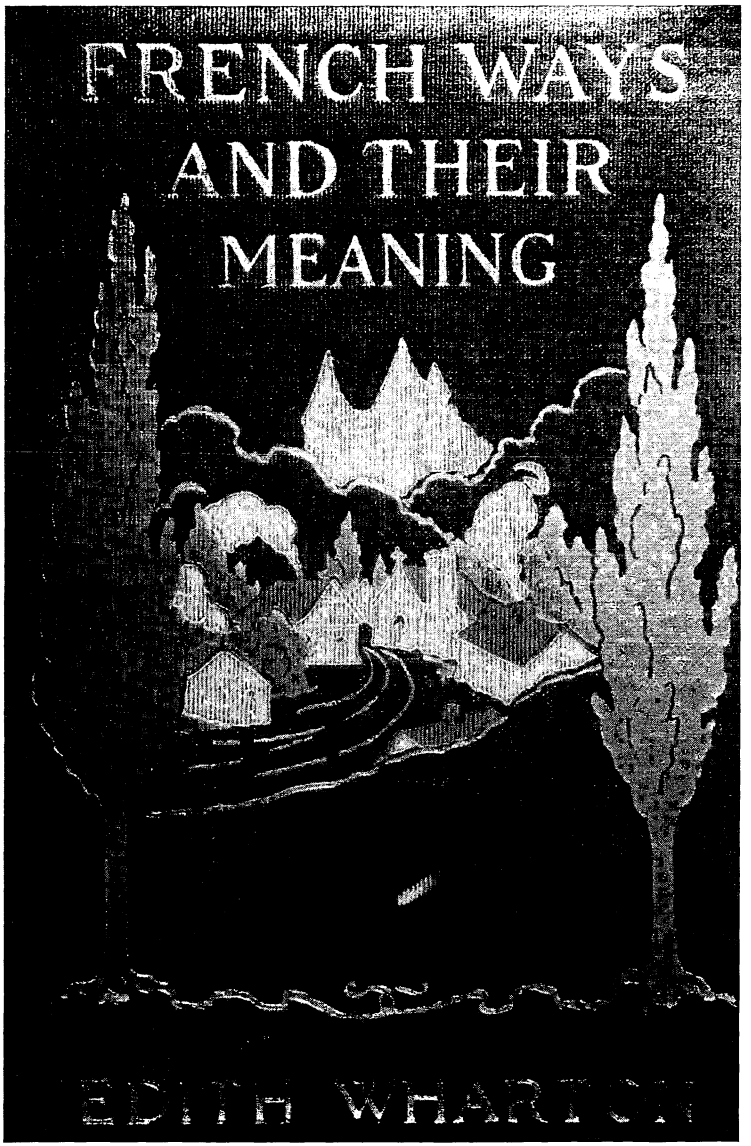

Figure 7: Cover of Edith Wharton's *French Ways and Their Meaning* (New York, 1919).

always be loyal, gallant and unresentful" (196). She was the "creation of factitious purity, so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses" (45). She "had not the dimmest notion that she was not free" (195).

In an era marked by increased patriotism among many Americans, not everyone agreed with Wharton's positive depiction of French women and negative conclusions about the women of the United States. Kate Field, a late-nineteenth-century American author, for example, published contrary observations in her travel narrative *Hap-Hazard*. In a chapter entitled "European *Versus* American Women," Field wrote of Europe in general, "woman as woman is not respected here." Especially of France she concluded, "though women are the more industrious half of the population, though they, as a rule, are cleverer than the men, though they show the greater aptitude in managing business, men speak of them lightly, and see in them probable or possible *filles de joie*." In the United States, on the other hand, Field believed that a woman was "allowed to exist as a human being."[23]

Both Field and Wharton credited the Puritan settlers of New England with originating modern American attitudes and customs concerning the female sex. However, the two authors could not have been further apart in their assessment of the group's contributions. Field praised "those stern Puritans who, in the Mayflower, braved the dangers of an almost unknown sea" for the new world they created. She "rejoice[d] at being born after their advent" into a society less "trammelled with conventionalities" where a woman stood a chance of becoming "a whole woman." Wharton, writing in *French Ways and Their Meaning*, on the other hand, argued that the "long hypocrisy which Puritan England handed on to America concerning the danger of frank and free social relations between men and women . . . [did] more than anything else to retard real civilisation [*sic*] in America."[24]

Not surprisingly, the puritanical lack of civilization and gender equality Wharton envisioned in the United States she found amply evidenced by the country's architecture and interior decoration. In the article "A Little Girl's New York," for example, Wharton referred to the multiple layers of window garniture typical in late-Victorian America as a "triple display of window lingerie" (figure 8). She remembered that this window treatment had always seemed to her "to symbolize the superimposed layers of under-garments worn by the ladies of the period—and even, alas, by the little girls."[25] In her autobiography, Wharton noted, "One of my most depressing impressions of my childhood is my recollection of the intolerable ugliness of New York, of its untended streets and the narrow houses so lacking in external dignity, so crammed with smug and suffocating upholstery." She went on to ask, "How could I understand that people who had seen Rome and Seville, Paris and London, could come back to live contentedly between Washington Square and the Central Park?"[26]

By recognizing Wharton's own preference for European, particularly French, aesthetics, her intentions in writing *The Age of Innocence* become clearer. Throughout the novel, Wharton distinguishes between those characters who conform to the conventions of old New York society and those who do not. A member of the former group, such as Newland Archer, had a provincial out-

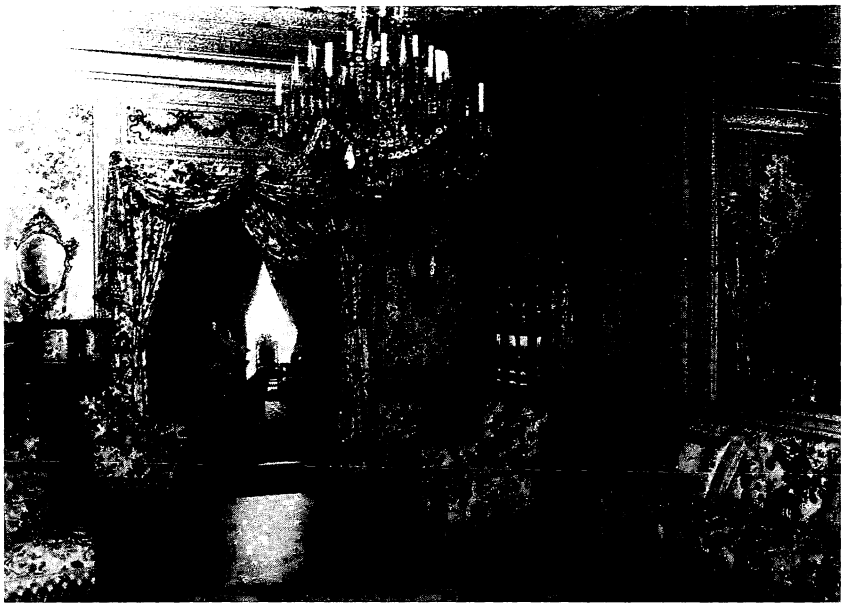

Figure 8: Interior of Edith Wharton's mother's house, complete with a "triple-display of window-lingerie," c. 1884. West Twenty-fifth Street, New York City. Reprinted by permission of the Estate of Edith Wharton and the Watkins/Loomis Agency. *Courtesy of Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.*

look; he "thanked heaven that he was a New Yorker" (31). Members of the latter group, most notably Catherine Mingott and Ellen Olenska, on the other hand, spent a good deal of time abroad and often brought foreign objects, customs, and tastes back to New York City. Because Wharton so often exalted French and other European artistic and social expressions and challenged American ideas and tastes in her works of nonfiction and in her autobiography, her architectural descriptions in *The Age of Innocence* clearly demonstrated her positive assessment of the indecorous characters Mingott and Olenska. By associating foreign items with two women judged imprudent by old New York standards, Wharton indicated that old New York society was mistaken in its definition of what was proper and what was improper.

Through her vivid descriptions of the built environment, Edith Wharton did more than simply recreate a romantic, bygone setting for her readers to visit. Rather, Wharton used architectural images in *The Age of Innocence* to criticize a segment of the United States' population that valued American architectural expressions and condemned new styles and forms, which might be associated with the "less particular" attitudes of European society (319). In the beginning

of *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton noted that conservative old New Yorkers actually opposed the construction in New York of "a new Opera House which should compete in costliness and splendour with those of the great European capitals" (3). They chose instead the "shabby red and gold boxes" of the "small and inconvenient" old Academy, which repelled the unsuitable "new people" (3). In Wharton's mind, this fear of new people and new buildings based on European models signified all that was wrong with America.

After her own decision to relocate to France prior to the first World War, Wharton wrote to her friend Sara Norton from Paris, "I am sunk in the usual demoralizing happiness which this atmosphere produces in me." Commenting on the "tranquil majesty of the architectural lines," she continued in French, "*Dieu que c'est beau* after six months of eye-starving!"[27] In another letter to Norton, Wharton articulated, "The most earnest self-searching will *not* discover in me the least regret for having left America. I would go back there tomorrow to live if I thought it necessary, & get many things out of my life there; but I *shouldn't like it*, & I like everything—almost!—here."[28]

For Wharton, as well as a handful of female characters in *The Age of Innocence*, America was oppressive. On the other hand, France and other foreign lands offered an opportunity for "real living."[29] In *The Age of Innocence*, only those who were mysteriously content with life in old New York could see Europe as a place where they "risked" their "dignity" (202). Those who were rightly opposed to old New York's conventions "mingled freely in foreign society" (13) and often included foreign designs and objects in their homes. By the end of the novel, Wharton had one of these characters, Ellen Olenska, actually join her as an American expatriate in France.[30]

By leaving the United States for Paris, Olenska shunned the Fifth Avenue that old New Yorkers thought "Heaven" and chose instead the "rich [French] atmosphere" that a character such as Newland Archer knew "to be too dense and yet too stimulating for his lungs" (331, 359). According to Wharton, however, Olenska's separation from the stifling setting of old New York was the only hope for a woman of her generation. In the final chapter of *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton expressed this opinion through the reminiscences of a much older Newland Archer. Remaining in New York, Archer considered himself "shy, old-fashioned, inadequate: a mere grey speck of a man compared with the ruthless magnificent fellow he had dreamed of being" (354). He characterized his deceased wife May in similar terms. Until the end, she was "lacking in imagination" and was "incapable of growth"; her "hard bright blindness had kept her immediate horizon apparently unaltered" (348).

Only Olenska had the opportunity for a different fate. Imagining her in Paris, Archer "thought of the theatres she must have been to, the pictures she must have looked at, the sober and splendid old houses she must have frequented, the people she must have talked with, the incessant stir of ideas, curiosities, images and associations thrown out by an intensely social race in a setting of immemorial manners" (359). In Paris, away from the judgmental eyes and strict

behavioral and artistic codes of conventional New York society, Archer optimistically hoped Olenska had experienced "the life of art and study and pleasure that filled each mighty artery to bursting" (354).

As an American who had lived through the last decades of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century, Edith Wharton's opinions about society and architecture in the United States distinguished her from many of her contemporaries. Wharton set *The Age of Innocence* in the same decade as the centennial anniversary of the founding of the United States. The era was one of increasing nationalism, which influenced numerous branches of cultural criticism. Wharton's challenge to popular pro-American sentiment related most directly to debates about American design and the proper place for women in American society, two topics that she found essentially related. She wrote about a period during which American architects began searching for new sources of inspiration that would lead to the creation of a distinct "national style," and female American authors such as Kate Field urged American women to "persist in preserving their own" customs "instead of immediately adopting" those of Europe.[31] However, rather than advocating peculiarly American practices, Wharton endorsed European, particularly French, conventions as models.

In the years immediately following World War I, Wharton's commentary was especially significant. As a resident of France during the 1910s, the author had witnessed much of the destruction caused by the conflict firsthand. She had used her skills as a writer to encourage more active participation on the part of the United States by "bring[ing] home to American readers some of the dreadful realities of war." Before her purportedly neutral homeland became officially engaged in fighting, Wharton penned a series of propagandistic articles for *Scribner's Magazine*, which were later collected and republished as the book *Fighting France*. She additionally edited an English-language volume of prose, poetry, artwork, and musical scores, entitled *The Book of the Homeless*, the profits from which benefited relief work in Europe. After the United States' entry in the war, Wharton began work on the articles that would comprise *French Ways and Their Meaning*, a project she later remembered she had undertaken with the goal of "making France and things French more intelligible to the American soldier."[32]

The Age of Innocence continued in the spirit of Wharton's war-time work. In the years immediately following the surrender of the Central powers, the role of the increasingly powerful United States would play in rehabilitating war-ravaged Europe remained unclear. United States President Woodrow Wilson opposed subjecting Germany to financial reparations that would help other European nations, particularly France and England, recover from the destruction they had suffered during the war. Leaders in the United States Senate were equally resistant to the creation of a League of Nations, which might require their nation once again to use military force to aid European allies. Faced with the prospect of American abandonment, Wharton drew upon her long-established beliefs in

French supremacy in architecture and decoration, as well as her convictions about the positive example set by French women, to encourage Americans to look beyond insular patriotic tendencies that might lead to isolationism. She urged her readers to look to France with both compassion and an eye toward their own national betterment.

Wharton fondly reminisced in *A Backward Glance* that *The Age of Innocence* was for her a diversion from the problems of a world reeling in the aftermath of the first World War. She noted concerning the writing of the manuscript, "I found a momentary escape in going back to my childish memories of long-vanished America."[33] Yet for the author, *The Age of Innocence* served as much more than an amusing distraction. The novel allowed Wharton to reassess the culture of her youth in terms of both artistic and social conventions. Her conclusions demonstrated her dissatisfaction with American aesthetic tastes and, as a woman and an artist, with American society in general. Through descriptions in her text, Wharton was able to illustrate her preference for the foreign, particularly French, designs and customs she advocated in much of her nonfiction. Her message challenged her readers to look beyond the provincial pro-American sentiment that had swept across much of the United States during the previous decades. She hoped to redirect her audience's attention toward the restorative yet respectful role the country could play in the new post-World War I world order. She called upon Americans to help rebuild war-ravaged Europe, while reminding them that there was still much they could learn from their ailing Continental allies.

Notes

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1. Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad* (1869; New York, 1984), 213, 518; Wayne Craven, *American Art: History and Culture* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1994), 327.

2. A. D. F. Hamlin, "The Battle of the Styles," *Architectural Record*, 1 (1892), reprinted in *America Builds*, ed. by Leland Roth (New York, 1983) 413; R. S. Peabody, "Georgian Houses of New England," *American Architect and Building News*, 2 (1877) and 3 (1878), reprinted in *America Builds*, 237-238.

3. Peabody, "Georgian Houses," 238. See also: Hamlin, "The Battle of the Styles," 406, and Christopher Monkhouse, "The Making of a Colonial Revival Architect" in *Ogden Codman and the Decoration of Houses*, ed. by Pauline C. Metcalf (Boston, 1988), 56-57. On the definition of colonial architecture in the late nineteenth-century see: C. F. McKim, "On Colonial Architecture," in *America Builds*, 232, note marked "†."

4. Louis Sullivan, "Characteristics and Tendencies of American Architecture," *Inland Architect and Builder*, 6 (1885), reprinted in *America Builds*, 336, 339.

5. Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman, Jr., *The Decoration of Houses* (1897; New York, 1919), 2, 13.

6. *Ibid.*, 1, 2.

7. Wharton and Codman "List of Plates," "Books Consulted," and "Introduction." In regard to sources for *The Decoration of Houses*, it should be noted that Wharton would have been

able to draw from texts written in Italian, French, German, and English, as she was fluent in all four languages. See: Mary Suzanne Schriber, *Writing Home: American Women Abroad, 1830-1920* (Charlottsville, Virginia, 1997), 192.

8. Edith Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction* (New York, 1925), 84, 85. For an example of a landscape as "an event in the history of the soul," see page 84 where Wharton explains that for author George Meredith the "moon-enchanted hollow of Wilming Weir in 'Sandra Belloni' is as much the landscape of Emilia's soul as of a corner of England."

9. Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (1920; New York, 1993), 44. Hereafter, excerpts from *The Age of Innocence* will be cited parenthetically. The pagination will refer to the 1993 edition of the text.

10. Shari Benstock, *No Gifts From Chance* (New York, 1994), 363-365; R. W. B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (New York, 1975), 433.

11. Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York, 1934), 6.

12. Edith Wharton, *French Ways and Their Meaning* (New York, 1919), 55, 72.

13. Edith Wharton, letter to Bernard Berenson, 12 December 1920, in *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, ed. R. W. B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis (New York, 1988), 433.

14. Edith Wharton, letter to Sinclair Lewis, 6 August 1921, in *The Letters of Edith Wharton* 445. Wharton's reference to "one of our leading Universities" alludes to Columbia University, whose president annually awards the Pulitzer Prize.

15. Literary scholar R. W. B. Lewis offers the most noteworthy example of this interpretation of *The Age of Innocence in Edith Wharton: A Biography*. He characteries the novel as "a warmly accurate portrait of a vanished physical and social scene" (430).

16. The similarities between Mary Mason Jones and the character Catherine Mingott have been widely noted. See, for example, Benstock, *No Gifts*, 358, and Lewis, *Edith Wharton*, 13.

17. Edith Wharton, "A Little Girl's New York," *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, 176 (August 1938): 359-360.

18. Wharton, "A Little Girl's New York," 357, 358, 360.

19. Wharton and Codman, *The Decoration of Houses*, 81-82; Richard Guy Wilson, "Edith and Ogden: Writing, Decoration, and Architecture," in *Ogden Codman and the Decoration of Houses*, 153.

20. Edith Wharton, letter to Barrett Wendell, 19 July 1919, in *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, 423.

21. Wharton, *French Ways and Their Meaning*, 149.

22. *Ibid.*, 111, 120; Edith Wharton, *Fighting France: From Dunkerque to Belfort* (New York, 1915), 226, 227, 235.

23. Kate Field, *Hap-Hazard* (Boston, 1873), 247, 248; Schriber, 154-155.

24. Field, *Hap-Hazard*, 246-247; Wharton, *French Ways and Their Meaning*, 112-113.

25. Wharton, "A Little Girl's New York," 358.

26. Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 54-55.

27. Edith Wharton, letter to Sara Norton, 18 December 1907, in *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, 125.

28. Edith Wharton, letter to Sally Norton, 18 September 1912, quoted in Benstock, *No Gifts*, 272, and Eleanor Dwight, *Edith Wharton: An Extraordinary Life* (New York; 1994), 172.

29. Wharton, *French Ways and Their Meaning* 102, 110.

30. According to some scholars, Wharton went so far in creating a parallel between herself and Olsenka that she set Olenska's fictitional Parisian abode in a district similar to her own real-life neighborhood in Paris. See: Benstock, 358-359, and Vanessa Chase, "Edith Wharton, The Decoration of Houses, and Gender in Turn-of-the-Century America" in *Architecture and Feminism*, ed. by Debra Coleman, Elizabeth Danze, and Carol Henderson (New York, 1996), 137.

31. Field, *Hap-Hazard*, 249.

32. Edith Wharton, *Fighting France* and *The Book of the Homeless*, ed. by Edith Wharton (New York, 1916). For additional information see: Benstock, *No Gifts*, 314-315, 317-319; *Lines of Fire: Women Writers of World War I*, ed. by Margaret R. Higonnet (New York, 1999), 390-391; Schriber, 202-203, 209. Quotations from Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 352, 357.

33. Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 369.