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# Domestic Aesthetics in Wilde, Wharton, and Codman

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## Abstract

In an unpublished notebook, Edith Wharton (1862-1937) listed architecture-alongside dogs, books, travel, and flowers-as a "ruling passion." In the 1890s, Wharton was launching her literary career as she was becoming a home designer and these occupations are inextricably bound in her corpus. Wharton's first book, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), on which she collaborated with the architect Ogden Codman, Jr., laid the groundwork for a career committed to aesthetics, form, taste, and a reverence for what she considered "the best models." The book, credited with the birth of interior design in the U.S., paved the way for women to enter the profession in the early twentieth century. More scholarly study than coffee-table book, *The Decoration of Houses* is as much artistic manifesto as it is treatise on the possibilities afforded by the appropriate design and decoration of one's home. It is also a key to understanding the architectural integrity of Wharton's fiction. Newland Archer's "glazed black-walnut bookcases," the "perilous coquetry" of Lizzie Hazeldean's décor, and Lily Bart's sense that she might "be a better woman" if she could "do over" her aunt's drawing-room all assume new meaning when read in the context of Wharton's book. As it happens, another impeccably dressed arbiter of taste also made his American debut dispensing advice on interior decoration. Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), then 28 and known mostly as a velvet-clad poet and personality, lectured across North America on house decoration in 1882. Wilde had yet to pen *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) or the comedies that made him a household name. He also had impressively little first-hand experience with home decoration. Although there seems to be no record of Wharton or Codman having interacted with Wilde, there would have been several occasions for them to do so in New York, Boston, Newport, or abroad. Further, Wharton and Codman would have had access to the most successful of Wilde's lectures, "The House Beautiful," which was widely reprinted in American newspapers, and they surely were aware of the Anglo-Irish celebrity by 1882. Hermione Lee has noted that the mother of Wharton's then fiancé, Harry Stevens, entertained Wilde at dinner parties during his visit that year to New York (Lee 60). Wilde, Wharton, and Codman shared a number of affinities-good art, literature, clothes, and china; a well-turned phrase; and the careful marketing of their own brand and photographic image, as evident in their meticulously staged portraits. Wharton and Codman would eventually become great admirers of Wilde's writing. All three would become expatriates who chose France as a final resting place. In the proposed fifteen- to twenty-minute talk, I will consider an under-examined transatlantic literary relationship uniting Edith Wharton, Ogden Codman, Jr., and Oscar Wilde. I will demonstrate that although *The Decoration of Houses* makes no mention of Wilde's lectures on interior décor, nor do the letters or biographies, the book Wharton wrote with Ogden Codman, Jr. engages and advances many of the ideas articulated by Wilde. In fact, I will argue that Wilde's "The House Beautiful" may well have served as a meaningful but unacknowledged influence on *The Decoration of Houses*.

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