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Memorial Boxes and Guarded Interiors: Edith Wharton and Material Culture (Amer Lit Realism & Naturalism)

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In Edith Wharton’s works, references to architecture, interior decoration, painting, sculpture, and fashion abound. As these essays demonstrate, art and objects are for Wharton evidence of cultural belief and reflect the values, assumptions, and customs of the burgeoning consumer culture in which she lived and about which she wrote. Furthermore, her meditations about issues of architecture, design, and decoration serve as important commentaries on her vision of the literary arts.

In *The Decoration of Houses* she notes that furniture and bric-à-brac are often crowded into a room in order to compensate for a "lack of architectural composition in the treatment of the walls," and that unless an ornamental object "adequately expresses an artistic conception" it is better removed from the room. These aesthetic standards apply equally to her construction of narratives and are evidence of a sensibility that counters typical understandings of Wharton as a novelist of manners and place her instead as an important figure in the development of American literary modernism.

Essays in this collection address issues such as parallels between her characters and the houses they occupy; dress as a metaphor for the flux of critical fashion; the marketing of Wharton's work to a growing female readership ; her relationship to mass culture industries such as advertising, theater, and cinema; the tableaux vivant both as set piece and as fictional strategy; the representation of female bodies as objets d’art; and her characters’ attempts at self-definition through the acquisition and consumption of material goods. All of Wharton’s major novels—*The House of Mirth*, *The Fruit of the Tree*, *Ethan Frome*, *The Custom of the Country*, *Summer*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *Twilight Sleep*—as well as her short stories, criticism, and essays are explored.

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