

Visualising the Critical: Artistic Convention and Eclecticism in Oscar Wilde's Writings on the Decorative Arts

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In the mid-nineteenth century, the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) published his scientific study, *Cosmos: A Sketch of the Physical Description of the Universe* (1849). In this text Humboldt inverted the Romantic doctrine that associated imagination or artistic agency with a superior faculty and artistic genius with the gifted few. Arguing that the imagination was present within all people, but that it often lay dormant, especially among the masses, Humboldt also suggested it could be activated by contrasting botanical species from tropical and temperate climates. Such juxtapositions, he believed, could induce “more vivid impressions in the minds of [the] less highly gifted . . . heightening their powers of artistic creation” (Humboldt 454). This idea built upon his hypothesis that the greater a region’s biodiversity, the better an individual may grasp the inherent unity binding nature’s infinite variety. Seeking the similarities binding “strongly contrasting forms” the “spontaneous impressions of the untutored mind” would lead, “like the laborious deductions of the cultivated intellect, to the same intimate persuasion, that one sole and indissoluble chain binds together all nature” (5–6).

Recognising, however, that the average citizen had limited opportunities to travel to tropical locales, Humboldt believed that a similar effect could be achieved through a number of secondary experiences. These included reading lively travel literature, viewing landscape painting, and cultivating tropical gardens or collections, especially those where local specimens were placed alongside the exotic. Each activity allowed in its own way the study of the exotic to be transferred to, and considered within, a European setting and enabled the comparison of the foreign against the local in order to identify what was common to both (Humboldt 436). It also informed Humboldt’s ideal of practical instruction, one based on the visual study and documentation of natural specimens within the field, rather than the accumulation of knowledge through the reading of books and the attendance of lectures (De Lorenzo & Plaats 2006).

It is this idea of practical instruction achieved through the study of visual cues rather than text that the current paper seeks to consider. This article will explore this in relation to the late-nineteenth-century poet and aesthete Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), particularly in his long essay “The Critic as Artist” (1891). Like Humboldt, Wilde argued for a practical system of education and the pedagogical benefits of visual study. Arguing the benefit of both to the development of the critical temperament within the modern world, his focus settled on the strategies made explicit by the aesthetic interior and decorative arts. The interest of Wilde’s writings, it will be argued, is in the insight they offer into the mental processes and conceptual intent that Wilde attached to the visual strategies of “artistic convention:” the representation of natural forms as stylized patterns (Figure 2), and the juxtaposition of different styles within the aesthetic-interior and/or decorative arts (Figure 3). While both have been recognised as tropes common to an aesthetic sensibility, the first supporting an emerging formalism and “art for art’s sake ethic,” the latter being linked to the reform of design education and production, their representation of specific mental strategies,

which Wilde would go on to equate with the critical temperament and cosmopolitanism, has received little attention.



Figure 1: Oscar Wilde, New York 1882 by Napoleon Sarony.

Source:

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:1882_Napoleon_Sarony_photographs_of_Oscar_Wilde#mediaviewer/File:A_Wilde_time_3.jpg



Figure 2: Owen Jones, Original drawing for 'The Grammar of Ornament'; Plate XL, Moresque No. 2 (Drawing), published 1856. Prints, Drawing and Paintings Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Figure 3: Walter Crane, frontispiece to Clarence Cook, *The House Beautiful: Essays on beds and tables, stools and candlesticks*, 1878. Source: Stephen Calloway and Lyne Federle Orr, *The Cult of Beauty: The Aesthetic Movement 1869-1900*, London: V&A Publishing, 2011, p. 131. Cook's text was the inspiration for Wilde's American Lectures on the House Beautiful.

Culture, Criticism and Cosmopolitanism

In the “The Critic as Artist” (1891), Wilde identified criticism as essential to education in the modern world. For Wilde, criticism offered the necessary “thread” that would guide man through the “wearisome labyrinth” and the “mess of facts” that modern systems of education had produced. The goal, he suggested, was to “retain a sense of form” and to “distil . . . into a finer essence.” Central to this project was the juxtaposition of dissimilar objects (Wilde, “The Critic as Artist, Part II” 210).

Wilde also positioned criticism as part of the larger social or political project of cosmopolitanism:

It is criticism that makes us Cosmopolitan . . . It is only by cultivation of the habit of intellectual criticism that we shall be able to rise superior to race prejudices. This note sounded in the modern world by Goethe first, will become, I think, the starting point for the cosmopolitanism of the future. Criticism will annihilate race prejudices, by insisting upon the unity of the human mind in the variety of its forms. (Wilde, “The Critic as Artist, Part II” 211)

Wilde’s linking of cosmopolitanism, education and criticism was not unusual for the time and recalls the broader discourses on Victorian cultivation. Seeking to define an agency that stood apart from the heroic individuality of romantic genius, this discourse identified another type of accomplishment, a creativity and critical judgement that could be made available to a wider group of people. David Wayne Thomas, in *Cultivating Victorians: Liberal Culture and the Aesthetic* (2004), has described this new conception of critical agency as Victorian “many-sidedness” (28–34). Amanda Anderson, in *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (2001), and Linda Dowling, in *The Vulgarization of Art: The Victorians and the Aesthetic Democracy* (1996), have identified it with ambivalence and cosmopolitanism.

To be many-sided (or cosmopolitan) in the nineteenth century was to cultivate an ambivalent disposition and a detachment from one’s own life or culture. As Thomas has argued, that which distinguished Victorian “many-sidedness” within the broader discourse of liberal agency was the idea of “plural forms of life:”

Liberal subjectivity declares a habitation in a critical position from which various positions – even positioning in general—can be thought. To declare a place in that habitat is to lay claim to what . . . is a distinctly liberal aspiration to many-sidedness, a vision to which Pater has it “all the ends of the world are a matter of interest and concern.” (Thomas 47)

This occupation of multiple lives permitted, as Anderson has suggested, “a reflective distance from one’s original or primary cultural affiliations, a [desire for a] broad understanding of other cultures and customs, and a belief [be it somewhat problematic] in universal humanity” (Anderson 63–4). It also identified a tempered subjectivity that could be viewed as genuinely democratic and accessible to those lacking artistic genius, a group previously excluded from aesthetic agency by romantic theories of the imagination (Thomas 33).

These are ideas that Wilde developed in his writings. In “The Critic as Artist,” he argued the critic should occupy multiple lives and viewpoints at any one time, be they racial, geographical or historical. Suggesting that the development of the critical capacity was dependent not only on an understanding of the nineteenth century, but also of “every century which preceded it,” and that to “know oneself, one must know about all others,” Wilde drew attention to the critic’s capacity to empathise with the art of all ages and places. “There must,” he wrote, “be no mood with which one cannot sympathize, no dead mode of life that one cannot make alive” (Wilde, “The Critic as Artist, Part II” 172–3). Achieving this, the critic could facilitate a process of judgement that remained, in Wilde’s view, open-ended and “incomplete.” Locating the critic’s method in “those modes which suggest reverie and mood” rather than the “obvious”—“art forms that have but one message to deliver”—ensured that all “interpretations [were] true” and none “final” (Wilde, “The Critic as Artist, Part I” 147–8). Finally, and perhaps more importantly for Wilde as an aesthete, an acknowledgment of the “incomplete” also enabled the critic to enact the conceptual process, rather than represent, that which revealed the beautiful in art:

It is through its very incompleteness that Art becomes complete in beauty, and so addresses itself not to the faculty of recognition nor to the faculty of reason, but to the aesthetic sense alone, which while accepting both reason and recognition as stages of apprehension subordinates them both to a pure synthetic impression of the art as a whole taking whatever alien emotional elements the work may possess, uses their very complexity as a means by which a richer unity may be added to the ultimate impression itself. (Wilde, “The Critic as Artist, Part I” 147–8)

Wilde had explored these ideas as early as 1882, in a series of lectures delivered to North American audiences on the House Beautiful and the Aesthetic movement in England.¹ Advocating a system of “practical instruction,” one in which the young no longer “grapple with long hours of study of the sciences ... [and] European history,” Wilde linked the reformation of design to the collective display of diverse decorative arts from multiple eras, styles, and geographical regions. An invaluable school of art, he suggested:

would be a museum, which, instead of showing stuffed giraffes and other horrible objects which scientific men wish to see gathered together, would contain all kinds of simply decorative work, different styles of furniture, dress, etc., made in different periods, and especially in the periods when English artists made beautiful things, and where local artisans and handicraftsmen could go to study the styles and patterns of noble designers and artisans who worked before them. (O’Brien 410–11)

“Such efforts of cultivation,” he noted, were demonstrated each Saturday night “by the scene in the South Kensington museum ... where artisans are to be seen, notebook in hand, gathering ideas to be used in their next week’s work.” “A good museum” he concluded, can “teach your artisans more in one year than they would learn by means of books or lectures in ten” (O’Brien 410–11).

While Wilde’s idea of a Museum of Decorative Arts was not new, and builds, as he openly admitted, upon the design reforms put in place at South Kensington by Henry Cole and the Commissioners for the 1851 Exhibition, Wilde’s explicit rejection of

traditional modes of learning, the study of books and attendance of lectures, an educational system underpinning the earlier Mechanical Institutes, highlights the cultivating properties he attributed to the experience of visual material and the everyday use of beautiful objects. For Wilde, the redemptive application of such principles had the potential to be wide-reaching, extending beyond the reformation of the arts and its middle class audience. Observing that the “handling of coarse objects begets coarse handling,” Wilde also argued that the everyday use of beautiful objects had the potential to elevate the skills and sensibilities of the working classes. “You use delicate things” he argued, “to accustom your servants to handling them securely:”

It will be a martyrdom for a long time at first, but you may be content to suffer in so good a cause. I bought Venetian glass when I was at college, and for the first term my servant broke one glass every day, and a decanter on Sunday, but I persevered in buying them, and during the succeeding terms of my whole stay at college, he did not break a single piece. (O’Brien 412–13)

Extending this paradigm further, Wilde notes that “in a restaurant in San Francisco, I saw a Chinese navvy drinking his tea out of a most beautiful cup as delicate as the petal of a flower.” Observing that “these navvies” did not break these delicate cups, as “they are accustomed to handling them,” he goes on to invert the conventional paradigm of improvement, by noting that he, “who was staying in a first class hotel in which thousands of dollars was spent on gaudy colour and gilding,” was forced to drink “out of a cup which was an inch and a half thick” (O’Brien 412–13).

In “The Critic as Artist,” Wilde identified Plato as the source for such thinking in his writings.² Attributing to Plato the claim that the true role of education was to teach the student a “love of beauty,” and that the best methods to achieve this were the “development of temperament, the cultivation of taste, and the creation of a critical spirit,” Wilde also linked the educational process to the beauty of one’s physical surroundings. It is the “beauty of material things” Wilde suggested, that “prepare[s] [the] soul for the reception of a beauty that is spiritual.”

By slow degrees there is to be engendered in [the student] such a temperament as will lead him naturally and simply to choose the good from the bad, and rejecting what is vulgar and discordant, to follow by fine instinctive taste all that possesses grace and charm and loveliness. Ultimately, in its due course, this taste is to become critical and self-conscious, but at first it is to exist purely as cultivated instinct, and “he who has received this true culture of the inner man will with clear and certain vision perceive the omissions and faults in art or nature, and with a taste that cannot err, while he praises, and finds his pleasure in what is good, and receives into his soul, and so becomes good and noble, he will rightly blame and hate the bad, now in the days of his youth, even before he is able to know the reason why:” and so, when, later on, the critical spirit and self-conscious spirit develops in him, he “will recognise and salute it as a friend with whom his education has made him long familiar.” (Wilde, “The Critic as Artist, Part II” 194–5)³

Barbara Maria Stafford, in *Visual Analogy, Consciousness and the Art of Connecting* (2001), has explained Plato’s thesis of critical judgement as one that is determined by the ancient ideal of “participatory analogy.” Distinguishing participatory from proportional analogy, a method based “on establishing quantitative proportions using

a geometrical language of equality and inequality,” the rhetoric of participation “employed a mimetic vocabulary of similarity and dissimilarity” (Stafford 2–3). Identifying the latter “specifically with Plato”—who “declared that analogy was the most beautiful bond possible” (*Timaeus* 3c)—Stafford goes on to describe analogy as a “metaphoric and metamorphic practice for weaving discordant particulars into a partial concordance” that “spurs the imagination to discover similarities in dissimilarities.” At the same time, analogy continues to acknowledge “difference” by avoiding the “subsumption of two inferior, dichotomous terms into a superior third” (Stafford 8–9). Analogy is celebrated by Plato in *Timaeus* (29–30) and *The Republic* (472 b–e), where he develops the notion of an “image sharing or partaking in a pattern.” Stafford argues that, for Plato, analogy was both a “metaphysics and a logic, a vision and a form of reasoning” that allowed him to infer the “ontological and phenomenological likenesses binding seemingly unrelated structures” (Stafford 89).

For Stafford, the value of the concept of analogy for present day art practice is the opportunity it offers to develop a “language for talking about resemblance” and to counter an “exaggerated awareness of difference” in contemporary Western culture (Stafford 10). This too was a concern for Wilde and his late-Victorian contemporaries. Wilde, as already noted in this paper, was critical of educational systems in nineteenth-century England. His complaint focused on the exaggerated role modern education gave to memory and the accumulation of information. “Burdening the memory with a load of unconnected facts,” modern education, taught “people how to think” but not “how to grow.” Advocating a return to “wisdom” and the development of a critical temperament, Wilde, like Stafford above, suggested a return to the critical strategies of the ancient Greeks. “While “our subject-matter is in every respect larger and more varied . . . theirs” he suggested, “is the only method by which [it] can be interpreted” (Wilde, “The Critic as Artist, Part II” 209).

Wilde was not alone in expressing such sentiments. The inability to process and critically judge the vast quantities of data that was available to modern man—leaving him, in Wilde’s words, “sunk under a mess of facts”—was identified by the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt as the “great” problem of the Modern age (Wilde, “The Decay of Lying” 19; Humboldt 370–71). The “increasing accumulation of ideas and feelings” and the “powerful influence of their mutual reaction” had, Humboldt suggested, expanded man’s “field of view.” He attributed this to Western culture’s growing access to the New World through exploration and colonisation, and the experience of these domains by the European public through secondary sources such as travel literature, landscape painting and the cultivation of exotic plant collections (Humboldt 436). Generating a juxtaposition of “strongly contrasting forms” had generated, in Humboldt’s view, a “new species of intellectual enjoyment” and one “wholly unknown to antiquity.” As outlined in the introduction of this paper, he also suggested that this modern juxtaposition of data offered the common man new opportunities to gain knowledge and insights that the cultivated intellect had previously achieved only through formal training and study. The “great project” of the modern age and for “all civilised nations,” he suggested, was to develop the mechanisms that would further this “comparison of the [world’s] most widely separated parts” (Humboldt 436).

Another writer who shared this concern for modern judgement and education was the critic and artist William Morris (1834–1896). For Morris, the decline of the arts in

Western society, with its division into the fine and lesser or decorative arts, was a direct result of the progress of the modern intellect and its growing accumulation of fact. As “the thought of man became more intricate, more difficult to express, ... art grew a heavier thing to deal with” and “labour was ... divided among great men, lesser men, and little men.” The result, Morris argued, was “ill for the Arts altogether.” The lesser arts became “trivial, mechanical, unintelligent, incapable of resisting the changes pressed down on them by fashion or dishonesty.” The fine or higher arts, on the other hand, while “practiced ... by great minds and wonder-making hands, unhelped by the lesser,” lost “the dignity of popular arts and [became] ... dull adjuncts to unmeaning pomp, or the ingenious toys for a few rich and idle men.” The sole solution to this decline was to reinvigorate the “lesser arts” of handicraft and to once again elevate the craftsman to the status of the artist (Morris 157).

Taking this observation beyond education and applying it more broadly to English culture and the arts, Wilde, like William Morris before him, promoted an advancement of the decorative arts. Unlike Morris, however, who was seeking to reassert the artistic status of the craftsman, Wilde’s interest was motivated by a conviction that a promotion of the decorative arts through the aesthetic interior would nurture the critical temperament within contemporary culture. The “mission of the aesthetic movement,” he suggested, “was to lure people to contemplate, not to create” (Wilde, “The Critic as Artist, Part II” 197). This could be achieved, he suggested, through the employment of specific formal devices.

Artistic Convention and Stylistic Eclecticism

The first of these devices was Wilde’s support for abstract and geometrical pattern. He also termed this practice “Orientalism.” The value of the abstract for Wilde lay in “its frank rejection of imitation” and “its dislike to the actual representation of any object in Nature.” Orientalism, Wilde also suggested, also had the advantage of transforming “the visible things of life” into “artistic conventions” and had the capacity to represent “things that Life has not ... [yet] invented and fashioned for her delight” (Wilde, “The Decay of Lying” 25).

In 1858, in a lecture entitled “The Deteriorative Power of Conventional Art over Nations,” the art critic John Ruskin (1819–1900) rejected the contribution of “artistic convention” to the reformation of British decorative arts and design. Ruskin’s lecture was presented at the opening meeting of the Architectural Museum at the South Kensington Museum in London, an institution which, following the International Exhibition of 1851, was founded to improve the design, production and appreciation of British decorative arts. The focus of Ruskin’s critique was the architect Owen Jones (1809–74), author of *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856) and advocate of artistic convention (Figure 2). For Ruskin, not only was the process of abstraction that convention engendered openly dismissive of a mimetic function of art, it also denied the operation of a liberated and autonomous will on which art proper (according to doctrines of the secondary imagination) was dependent. For Ruskin, the practice of artistic convention enslaved the artist and removed his ability to invent, imagine, judge or create. Rendering the artefact mute by disconnecting it from its motive (the imagination and critical judgement of the artist), convention also opened the way to machine production and the removal of the craftsman from the art process (qtd. in Cook and Wedderburn 10:188–90).⁴

Methodologically based on the “detached observation of botanical specimens,” Jones’s *Grammar of Ornament* sought an objective and universal nature through the study of the singular and specific. As Stacey Sloboda has recently argued, Jones’s intent was fundamentally cosmopolitan. The method he employed also appears to be analogical:

Faithfully copying individual examples of ornament from disparate regions of the world, Jones united their peculiarities under the universalizing term of “nature.” This strategy was crucially linked to cosmopolitanism, an attitude that renders the local universal and that is repeatedly evident in the *Grammar*’s thirty-seven Propositions. These propositions were the key for deciphering the lingua-franca of world ornament into a coherent language of design principles. They outlined his reformist theory of ornament, emphasizing the subordinate, complementary role of decoration in architecture, the emergence of ornament from geometric abstractions of nature and the importance of harmonious colour to produce flat decorative surfaces. The Propositions offered a method of translation that the reader could then apply to a range of foreign encounters throughout the text, rendering previously exotic imagery knowable and ordered. (Sloboda 228)

Locating agency and invention in the reactions of the observer rather than the intent (or freedom) of the artist, the artistic convention (or Orientalism) of Jones’s *Grammar* embodied, for Wilde, the “transmutation of visible things into beautiful and imaginative work.” It offered Wilde a counter to the “imitative spirit” in Western art—one that was, in Wilde’s opinion, “vulgar, common and uninteresting” (Wilde, “The Decay of Lying” 25). More importantly, it rejected “obvious modes” of representation and opened the way for “reverie and mood.” Orientalism, Wilde suggested, prepared the “soul for the reception of the true imaginative work” and developed in it a “sense of form” that was the basis for both “creative ... [and] critical achievement” (Wilde, “The Critic as Artist, Part II” 199–200; O’Brien 396). A parallel experience could be achieved with the use of a keynote colour, be it in painted images or a decorated interior. Able to unify a composition into “a harmonious whole,” colour also left the work open to a multitude of readings: “Mere colour, unspoiled by meaning, and unallied with definite form can speak to the soul in a thousand different ways” (Wilde, “The Critic as Artist, Part I” 147–8).

Wilde’s identification of artistic convention with the critical temperament openly challenged Ruskin’s earlier view. Identifying Orientalism with the formation of the critical temperament, Wilde was able to assert the “artistic” credentials not only of criticism but also of artistic convention. This link to art proper or artistic agency was now made through a process of analogy—a conceptual process of connecting and contemplation through which the observer perceived “similarity in dissimilarity”—rather than in the artist’s making of the artefact.

A second strategy embedded within the aesthetic interior and directed at similar goals was the strategic juxtaposition and comparison of historical styles. This play with style is considered by Maureen Frances Moran (2007) in her recent paper on the Oxford poet and painter Walter Pater (1839–1894). Drawing on the description of Pater’s home by the author Mary Ward (1851–1920), Moran demonstrates the role of visual contrasts within this interior—one in which Morris wallpaper, spindle-legged tables and chairs, blue plates and pots “brought from Holland,” framed embroidery,

engravings by Renaissance artists and simple flower arrangements, juxtapose the natural and the artificial, the medieval and Renaissance, and the handmade with the mass produced. Moran argues that this oppositional eclecticism announced for the Oxford intellectuals a new art of discrimination and their rejection of the “overstuffed values of mid-Victorian design” (Moran 291). A material backdrop to status (intellectual rather than social), the interior was also configured as a defining element in the psychological experiences that determined the mental evolution of the individual mind. Drawing parallels between Pater’s literary descriptions of the House Beautiful and the environmental determinism of the “genetic” psychologist James Sully (1842–1923)—who argued “the contents and order of arrangements of environments ... determine the form of our mental life,” – Moran also linked the aesthetic interior to nineteenth century theories of mental progress (Moran 295).

Taking into account Wilde’s interest in Plato, and by extension analogy, some additional insight into the mental life that was intended for the occupant of the aesthetic interior can be inferred. Was this oppositional display, like colour and artistic convention, intended also to have a critical function? Were the decorative strategies employed within the aesthetic interior, including the use of colour, Orientalist form and eclecticism, intended to function as triggers for the cultivation of a new critical sensibility built upon the associative processes of analogy? Were such spaces intended to awaken an otherwise slumbering imagination among the middle and lower classes? Was this to be achieved by the observer through the contemplation of visually opposed objects, the mental exercise of seeking similarity in difference revealing insights or judgements more commonly obtained through formal training? Was the oppositional eclecticism of such interiors intended as visual cues for cultivation and reform—an emancipation of the imagination within the broader community? Do such spaces represent a new (late) Victorian vocabulary?

Some evidence to support such speculation is found in the 1882 descriptions of artists’ houses by the late-nineteenth century commentator, Mary Haweis. Examining the houses for the artists Sir Frederick Leighton, William Burges and Alma-Tadema, the former and latter purpose built and including dedicated studio spaces, Haweis’s descriptions associate the stylistic diversity of the buildings interiors with the agency of the resident artists. This is perhaps most explicit in Haweis’s description of the eclecticism, extreme in both its temporal and geographical range, of Leighton’s house. Built for the artist by the architect George Aitchison (1825–1910) in 1865, the house was initially very simple, with the studio taking up much of the second floor. Through a series of additions, undertaken up to 1895, including an “Arab Hall”—designed to house Leighton’s collection of Syrian tiles—a winter studio, a silk room and Narcissus Hall, the house grew in stylistic and decorative complexity. The end result, as Haweis explained in 1882, was a series of rooms that represented a “gradual progress and ascent” that terminated, both for the artist and his visitors, in the studio itself. Importantly, this progress was undertaken through a series of spaces that were stylistically, geographically and temporally diverse: “reviving now antique, now medieval, now *Renaissance Italy*, from *Florence* to *Rome*, down through regal *Naples*, on to Cairo itself” (Haweis 1882, 3). “Passing ... from the *Moorish* dream” [the Arab Hall] to “*England*” (the dining room which included “several *Constables* and a lovely *Mason*”) such geographical and temporal juxtapositions were also expressed in the organisation of the decorative arts within each space. This is demonstrated in the dining room where a large “ebonized sideboard” was crowded with blue and white

china, both “*Nankeen* and old *English*, ... a Turkish coffee set, and flanked on either side by Arab chairs.” A similar effect was achieved in the stone stairwell—lined with paintings by “*Tintoret*, *Legros* and *Watts*”—the Arab Hall, incorporating Syrian tiles, *Zenana* (timber screens) and a Walter Crane frieze; and the studio itself, combining Eastern carpets, artistic studies, plaster casts of the Parthenon frieze, Greek fragments, *Bristol* pottery, books, pots and other general “usefuls” (Haweis 4–10). Refusing to reconcile this diversity into a single or hybrid style, the aim, Haweis pointed out, was to offer “a vision of each” as it is seen through “modern eyes” (Haweis 3). Rejecting archaeological correctness in order to generate effect and mood, such juxtapositions, recalling Wilde’s thesis of incompleteness, also suggest a mode of judgement and analysis centred on the associative methods of analogy.

Purpose-built as an artist house and studio, it is perhaps not surprising that the interior scheme would reference Victorian theories of artistic production. Yet Wilde’s identification of the critical temperament as a mode of agency that, unlike the romantic imagination, was accessible to the general population suggests an additional reading of the interior. Opened to the public on a regular basis—on Sunday afternoons and Show Sunday prior to the Royal Academy’s Summer Exhibition—the house also served to build the public’s critical capacity (Robbins and Suleman 2005). Visually confronted on such occasions by the diverse styles, historical periods and modes of production, unified and artistically displayed by the architect and artist according to colour and pattern, the interior also provided opportunities for the visitor to observe features, both shared and varied, across the diverse design traditions displayed. In doing so, the observer would enact the cognitive processes—analogue rather than allegorical—that Wilde attributed to the formation of the critical temperament. A site of “artistic becoming” for the principal occupant of the house, the artist Lord Leighton—one represented by the work undertaken within the second floor studio—for Leighton’s clients or the general visitor, the “becoming” that was encouraged, was one that was critical.

Conclusion

Offering his critique of modern education as the context for his thesis on the formation of the critical temperament, Wilde positioned the aesthetic strategies of artistic convention and stylistic comparisons within a larger Victorian project of practical instruction. Viewing modern man as sunk “under a mess of facts” and education as limited by its overreliance on memory, Wilde and his contemporaries sought alternative systems of instruction. Finding this not in traditional strategies—the reading of books and the attendance of lectures—but in the experience of the aesthetic interior and decorative arts, Wilde opened the project of Victorian education to new visual vocabularies.

Pointing to Plato and the critical strategies of the ancient Greeks, he also identified the motive of this new vocabulary as analogical rather than allegorical; the extraction of similarity (the universal) from dissimilarity (difference) while maintaining the autonomy of the specific or other. For the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, this tension in modern education and the development of mechanisms, both visual and textual, to enact it demonstrated the “great project of the modern age” and the “common work of all civilised nations” (Humboldt 436). For Wilde it revealed the formation and conceptual workings of the critical faculty and its capacity to reform modern society. “Insisting upon the unity of the human mind in the variety of its

forms,” criticism, Wilde suggested, will “annihilate race prejudices.” It is criticism, he concluded, that makes us cosmopolitan (Wilde, “The Critic as Artist, Part II” 211).

Linking the above with artistic strategies of convention and stylistic contrasts also offers new insight into the role these visual strategies played within the aesthetic project. Artistic convention (also described by Wilde as Orientalism) and stylistic diversity are visual devices commonly attached to the aesthetic interior; the first demonstrating an emerging formalism and “art for art’s sake ethic,” the latter associated with the reform of design education and production of the decorative arts. Identifying both as visually enacting and stimulating the mental comparison of contrasting forms and encouraging analogical outcomes, Wilde located the motive of the aesthetic interior not only in the representation of the artist’s or client’s heightened aesthetic sensibility—the representation of a fixed ideal of beauty—but in the evolving and continuing cultivation (and thus improvement) of the room’s occupant/s. Recalling Mary Haweis’s description of Lord Leighton house and the accessibility of his home to the public, the aesthetic interior is transformed into a space of critical becoming that is visual, intuitive and potentially democratic.

Notes

¹ In America Wilde delivered variations of three basic lectures: “The Renaissance in English Art,” a presentation on the Pre-Raphaelites and the Grosvenor Gallery Artists, “Art and the Handicraftsman,” and “House Decoration.” First delivered in Chicago in May 1882, the latter was later retitled “House Beautiful: The practical Application of Aesthetic Theory to Exterior and Interior House Decoration, with Observations upon Dress and Personal Ornaments.” While Robert Voss, Wilde’s literary executor, published the first two lectures in 1908, no manuscript of the latter has survived. A reconstruction of the text, however, based on first-person reports in the American press of 1882, has been produced: vol. 8 of *Miscellanies*, edited by Robert Ross. O’Brien has argued that Ross’s edition of Wilde’s lectures is, however, incomplete, titled incorrectly, and misleading in that Ross failed to acknowledge that he was printing only the first version of “The English Renaissance” and that his “Art and the Handicraftsman” is the first version of “The Decorative Arts” and his “House Decoration” a later version of the same lecture (O’Brien 396). See also Gere and Hoskins (12, 88).

² Wilde does not state which of Plato’s texts he is referring to.

³ In *Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece* (2013), Iain Ross has documented Wilde’s debt to Plato and the writings of ancient Greece. Ross argues that these texts were not only foundational for Wilde—made evident by his education at Trinity and later Oxford—but were also viewed by the critic and his contemporaries as “originary” texts for modern thought. For Wilde and his contemporaries, modern intellectual endeavor and creativity “elaborated” rather than superseded that of their ancient predecessors. The priority given to Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Nikomacheian Ethics* by “Victorian political, literary and philosophical clans,” Ross suggests, was so profound that Wilde’s use of Greek sources was both conscious and unconscious. He develops this thesis by offering a reading of *Dorian Gray* “through the prism of the Platonic theory of Forms” (Ross 7–8).

⁴ This aspect of Ruskin’s thesis can be attributed to his debt to a Romantic theory of agency, a thesis that associated artistic invention with a liberated subject or “superior voluntary controul [sic] ... co-existing with the conscious will.” Distinguishing artistic invention from man’s ability to learn from nature and associating the former with a superior faculty or “genius,” this thesis also identified the motive informing “art proper” in the actions, feelings, and reactions of the individual artist rather than the conventions imposed by past traditions (Coleridge 202).

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