

Beyond Fancy, Beyond Taste:

Gender, Art, and Culture in America's Gilded Age

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In 1892 Bertha Honoré Palmer was named the President of the Board of Lady Managers for the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Despite Palmer's appointment, editors often portrayed her as little more than an ornament to her family, leaving her significant contributions to the developing art and cultural world absent from public record.¹ Contemporary periodicals recognized Palmer for "her beauty, her grace... [and] her own beautiful home," but there was little mention of Palmer's capabilities as an avid art collector and patron, the very roles that qualified Palmer to be nominated as the board's President.² Palmer honed her craft as an art connoisseur through the late 1870s and 80s. Palmer participation in the construction of her family's "private" palace enabled her to acquire a "staggering quantity of sculpture, furniture, paintings, rugs, glass, and objects d'art" to adorn her residences.³ In short, Palmer consciously leveraged her wealth and her gender roles to break into the male space of art collecting, though she was rarely recognized for her work by her male counterparts.

During the Gilded Age, Palmer was among a few elite women who were able to successfully contribute to the development of America's art and cultural world. As Palmer gained prominence within a part of the Chicago art world in the late 1880s, Isabella Stewart Gardner was beginning to make her first major acquisitions of fine art. For Gardner to gain recognition as an art collector and patron she had to actively "sidestep contemporary prescriptions for feminine demeanor for women of her class," something only women of her wealth and class status had the privilege to do.⁴ Despite Gardner's notable lasting contributions, her efforts were rarely mentioned in contemporary periodicals. In 1894, Gardner was portrayed

¹ "Mrs. Potter Palmer of Chicago," *Godey's Magazine (1892-1898)*, May 1893, 126.

² Antoinette Van Hoesen Wakeman, "Mrs. Potter Palmer," *Harper's Bazaar (1867 - 1912)*, Jan. 9, 1892, 25.

³ Kathleen D McCarthy, *Women's Culture: American Philanthropy and Art*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 45.; Richard R. Brettell, "Monet's Haystacks Reconsidered.," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 11, no. 1 (1984): 18.

⁴ McCarthy, *Women's Culture*, 158

as the influential leader of the “Bostonian fashionable set,” reducing her art and cultural contributions to a “passion” or a “fancy.”⁵ The periodical gave Mr. John L Gardner credit for Gardner’s art connoisseurship stating he “encourages her in any of the enterprises she may take a fancy to, though he seldom assists her in carrying them out.”⁶ Palmer and Gardner were accompanied by handful of other women within America’s most elite class who fought to insert themselves in the construction of America’s cultural society.

Despite the remarkable contributions of Bertha Palmer and Isabella Stewart Gardner as art collectors and patrons, society continued to perceive them as little more than women of taste. This thesis asks how elite women were able to pursue this very privileged sort of work in an era where gender ideology simultaneously excluded them. It also interrogates how their collection strategies, publicized associations, and philanthropy efforts shaped the modern art world. This thesis argues that elite women leveraged Gilded Age gender ideology and class expectations to shape America’s cultural spaces, such as art museums and associations, even as these very institutions were quickly becoming defined as men’s spaces. The development of the cultural world often excluded and restricted women from becoming active contributors, regardless of their class. Palmer and Gardner’s dual identities as women and elites aided them in their efforts to break through the gendered practices of culture institutions and definitions of art to become cultural leaders. Women within the most elite and wealthiest class frequently found ways to publicize their art and cultural work through art associations, interior decorating, art collecting, and art patronage. Elite women shaped the development of art and culture in America by embracing the gendered connotations and boundaries society was simultaneously establishing.

⁵ “Mrs. John L Gardner: Snap Shots of the Famous Social Leader and Her Husband...”, *The Boston Sunday Globe*, Apr. 1, 1894, 25.

⁶ *Ibid*, 25.

This thesis is a qualitative study employing methods of social and cultural history to analyze relevant primary and secondary source material. The primary sources include periodicals, correspondences, contemporary literature, and museum records written from a variety of perspectives. Because museums tend to keep their own in-house archives, researchers' ability to access key primary records is significantly restricted, a situation the covid-19 pandemic made worse. This thesis required the identification of individual elite women's names and contributions to find their records in institutions, historical societies, and family archives spread from Chicago to Washington DC and Boston. Despite the discovery of sources accessibility was limited by the slow and labor-intensive process of digitization, requiring researchers to travel to specific archives. The collection of secondary source material did not prove any less challenging due to a relative absence of published scholarship on the lives of America's most elite, in relation to philanthropy, culture, and art. However, the combination of uncovered primary and secondary source materials provided a lens to analyze, interpret, and concluded how the efforts of elite women in the Gilded Age undoubtedly paved the way for women's continued and increasing contributions to art and culture within the twentieth century.

This study is important because the characterizations of elite women collectors as simply ladies of taste has shaped scholarly literature. There is a lacuna of historical scholarship on the role wealthy women had in shaping elite's involvement in art connoisseurship and museum patronage in the late-nineteenth century United States. The existing historical scholarship is largely focused on individual women and familial contributions including the lives of Bertha Palmer, Isabella Stewart Gardner, the women of the Rockefeller and Vanderbilt families. Though this line of inquiry and research is important, it fails to interrogate the shared practices of America's elite women. There are only a handful of smaller historical studies that examine the

collective contributions of elite women including Thomas Adam's *Buying Respectability: Philanthropy and Urban Society in Transnational Perspectives 1840s to 1930s* and Tom Stammers' *Women Collectors and Cultural Philanthropy, c. 1850-1920*. The absence of published studies focused on the collective efforts of elite women is extremely significant because it profoundly limits our historical understanding of the influential contributions elite women made to construct America's cultural society.

In the last fifty years, there have been only two extensive historical studies conducted on the collective contributions of elite American women to early art and cultural spaces: Kathleen D McCarthy's *Women's Culture: American Philanthropy and Art 1830-1930* (1991) and Dianne Sachko Macleod's *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects: American Women Collectors and the Making of Culture 1800-1940* (2008). In *Women's Culture*, McCarthy's examines the "slow evolution from charity to cultural authority" that women's role as cultural philanthropists underwent throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁷ McCarthy's conclusion that women's role as America's cultural custodians was initially restricted is key to understanding the exclusionary practices elite women overcame during the Gilded Age, as they fought to contribute to society's cultural development. Macleod study goes deeper than McCarthy's to examine "why the collecting of precious objects became such a significant feature in the lives of American [elite] women."⁸ By looking closely at elite women's psychological relationship with their collections Macleod successfully debunks the myth of the female collector as a frivolous consumer, thereby, enabling the examination of elite women's art connoisseurship in conjunction with the making of culture. McCarthy and Macleod's conclusions provide the foundational basis

⁷ McCarthy, *Women's Culture*, 244.

⁸ Dianne Sachko Macleod, *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects: American Women Collectors and the Making of Culture 1800 – 1940*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008.), 2.

for my inquiry about how gender and class shaped Gilded Age art world and how women used these same identities to write themselves into the development of America's cultural society.

Just as the historical scholarship has diminished elite women's role in shaping America's cultural society, it also has failed to recognize the broader institutional implications for museums. Art and museums continue to play an influential role within American cultural society, but the work of women in building them has remained largely invisible. Meanwhile, the hierarchal structures and exclusionary practices museums were founded upon is obscured. In uncovering elite women's contributions as art collectors, patrons, and association leaders we can begin to understand how today's most prominent museums continue to replicate this exclusion by failing to share the history of their 19th century practices and women's place. By evaluating elite women's efforts to insert themselves into the development of art and culture, we can better interpret their transition to museum professionals and founders in the early twentieth century. Collectively, this historical study works to rewrite the contributions of elite women back into the historical narrative of the development of America's art and cultural world.

This thesis works to rewrite the contributions of elite women back into the historical narrative of the development of America's art and cultural world. It will first outline the importance of art to American high society and how women were simultaneously and actively excluded from participating in the construction of America's cultural world. This thesis will then turn to evaluating several major strategies elite women utilized to claim a space for themselves within the increasingly male art sphere. Lastly, it will look at how women embraced the gendering of decorative arts to enable women outside of America's most elite class to publicly engage with art through women's associations. Whether out of responsibility, desire, or interest

elite women's efforts in art collecting, patronage, and associations aided the construction of America's art and cultural world.

Beginning in the late 1860s, America's wealthiest class took an increasing interest in the growth of art and culture in the United States. The immense wealth belonging to the American elites enabled these men and women to travel extensively throughout Britain and Europe. While abroad, elites actively engaged with refined, educated, and cultured society, sparking their desire to establish a "similar cultural life" in urban centers from Chicago and Cincinnati to New York and Boston.⁹ Elites exposure to the art and cultural world abroad enabled them to develop social networks with influential artists, art connoisseurs, and museum professionals influencing their approach to the founding of cultural institutions.¹⁰ As elites built to develop cultural organizations, they consequently linked elite superiority to the institutions themselves. With the absence of hierarchical social titles and ranks, American elites turned to symbols of respectability found in manifestations of cultured taste, behavior, and social engagement to distinguish the men and women who belonged within the "wealthiest and most exclusive circles."¹¹ The expression of gentility, refinement, and respectability became central to elites' cultural engagement. Fueled by the ongoing "conflict between old and new elites," the collection and exhibition of art became a quintessential representation of the families' capabilities as cultural philanthropists and their place within America's "giving class."¹² For both men and women their social club

⁹ Thomas Adam, *Buying Respectability: Philanthropy and Urban Society in Transnational Perspective, 1840s to 1930s*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 14.

¹⁰ Adam, *Buying Respectability*, 14.

¹¹ Adam, *Buying Respectability*, 15.

¹² Adam, *Buying Respectability*, 90-91.

memberships, charitable efforts, household decoration, collection practices, and art patronage became direct symbols of their elite status. The correlation between class status and cultural engagement gave way to the American elites claim of “cultural hegemony.”¹³

The exclusion of women, regardless of class, from the public cultural world can largely be contributed to increasingly essential and public role of art collecting. The establishment of cultural institutions, private collection, and art associations all relied on the acquisition and collection of art. However, the very nature of art collecting was increasingly characterized as masculine through gendered language and requirements. In Thomas Stammer’s study of *Women Collectors and Cultural Philanthropy*, he establishes the contemporary practice of collecting as gendered:

In the closing years of the nineteenth century, collecting was increasingly coded as a male pursuit, a sport which relied on forms of erudition, quasi scientific expertise, and moral self-mastery. To that extent, it was perceived as the antithesis of female consumption. To cite one influential summary of the problem: ‘masculine collecting, is informed and serious and feminine shopping, while requiring certain skills of selection and communication, is uninformal, trivial and can never lead to greatness without stepping outside gender roles.’¹⁴

The coding of the collector as anti-feminine came to shape the public contributions women were able to make. The defining characteristics of the “collector as a calculating strategist who rationally chooses art object in an orderly fashion,” directly opposed the “the more intimate, subjective, and impromptu relationship” society perceived women to have with objects and art.¹⁵

The expectation that men were better and more orderly collectors shaped the perception that women collectors were incapable of selecting and arranging objects into a cohesive collection.

Catharine Lorillard Wolfe was a recognized and establish art collector when her collection was

¹³ Adam, *Buying Respectability*, 89.

¹⁴ Tom Stammers, *Women Collectors and Cultural Philanthropy, c. 1850-1920*, *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 2020, 7-8.

¹⁵ Macleod, *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects*, 6.

regarded as “not harmonious” to the point that the pictures could “hardly be brought together in one room without seriously interfering with one another.”¹⁶ The portrayal devalued Wolfe’s collection based on her inability to seemingly select and acquire art pieces that worked or belonged together as a collection. By feminizing women’s collections their capabilities as art collectors were degraded, preventing their work from receiving public recognition. The inability for society to expand their definitions of collecting, collection, and collector to include the women’s processes for selection and acquisition worked to formally excluded them from the art and cultural world on principle.

Society often defined elite women’s collecting work as a leisure pursuit. Contemporary periodicals classified Isabella Stewart Gardner’s collecting efforts as a “passion” or “fancy” ignoring the very real artistic masterpieces she was collecting.¹⁷ While Bertha Palmer was an active collector of impressionist art, the closest contemporary reports came to characterizing Palmer as a collector was as “so close an observer and student that she is thoroughly conversant with the art... of the different countries of our civilized world.”¹⁸ In both Gardner and Palmer’s cases contemporary articles not only failed to recognize their amassed collections, they neglected the ways both women adhered to the criteria outlined within masculine definition of collecting. Both women worked closely with expert advisors who guided and informed their acquisition process insuring educated sincerity in their chosen selection. Often elite women’s collecting work was simply ignored. Earl Shinn (Edward Strahan) was one of the foremost art critics of the time who wrote the three volume *The Art Treasures of America*, in which he compares and

¹⁶ “Galley & Studio: The Metropolitan Museum of Art,” *The Art Amateur*, Dec. 1887, 18.

¹⁷ “Mrs. John L Gardner: Snap Shots of the Famous Social Leader and Her Husband...,” *The Boston Sunday Globe*, Apr. 1, 1894, 25.

¹⁸ Antoinette Van Hoesen Wakeman, “Mrs. Potter Palmer,” *Harper's Bazaar (1867-1912)*, Jan 09, 1892, 2,

analyzes the collections of the American elite.¹⁹ In Shinn's chapter entitled *The Gallery of Mrs. A. T. Stewart* examines the Stewarts' extensive collection calling it the "undoubtedly the principle private one of the country."²⁰ Despite touring the gallery after Mr. Stewart's death, Cornelia Stewart is not mentioned once within Shinn's chapter erasing and ignoring her art collecting work and acquisitions she made as a widow. The increasing erasure of elite women's art collecting efforts in print became a principal component of their exclusion. Society's inability to recognize elite women as art collectors further pushed their participation in the engagement in the cultural world to the wayside.

The gendered definition of the collector put female consumerism at the center of elite women's art acquisition efforts. Mary Morgan was one of the earliest elite female art collectors to have her efforts publicized to the world. Morgan worked with various art dealers to amass her collection, one of who reported it "was in their interest to keep a knowledge of the whereabouts and possessions of... [Morgan] to themselves."²¹ The mutual understanding between Morgan and her art dealer illustrates both party's recognition that Morgan's movements and spending habits would warrant public criticism. Upon Morgan's death her name was "hardly mentioned" as she became a vehicle for society to critique elite women's collecting practices:

No one imagines that as much money will be realized from it as Mrs. Morgan spent in gathering these innumerable treasures, but the sale has been so well worked up that fairly good prices are pretty sure to be obtained all through. Mrs. Morgan had no idea at all of what the things she bought were really worth. If they took her fancy, she was bound to have them at any price, and some of the dealers who acted as her agents made decidedly good terms for themselves in the transactions.²²

¹⁹ Earl Shinn, *The Art Treasures of America*. (New York: Garland, 1977)

²⁰ Earl Shinn, *The Art Treasures of America*. (New York: Garland, 1977), 23.

²¹ "Mrs. Morgan's Gems," *Philadelphia Times*, Feb. 21, 1886, 3.

²² "Mrs. Morgan's Treasures," *Buffalo Courier*, Mar. 6, 1886, 2.

In the assertion of Mrs. Morgan's ignorance to the financial value of the items she possessed, Morgan portrayed as an irresponsible and frivolous spender. The belief that women could not manage money was grounded in capitalist versions of manhood, which included "maintaining a balance between self-gratification and fiscal restraint."²³ Because of the fundamental differences between men and women, women were believed to be "incapable of conforming to this male ideal."²⁴ Therefore, the ideological myth that constructed women as too "irrational to control their spending" worked to further excluded elite women collectors based on the monetary exchanges involved in collecting.²⁵ The exclusion of elite women on economic and financial grounds extended into the social organizations responsible for shaping our cultural institutions.

The male social clubs of the ruling elite used membership requirements to institutionally exclude women from the developing world of art and culture. Regardless of class, women's participation in public organizations throughout the Gilded Age was primarily restricted based on their gender identity. The rise of male social clubs in urban centers facilitated elite men's assertion of their "identity and authority" in the founding of art and cultural institutions.²⁶ Club membership was guided by strict social standards, high membership dues, and member endorsement practices, preventing elite women's involvement. The Union Club, one of the most prestigious New York social clubs, outlined the qualifications for membership as:

adult citizens of the United States, or foreigner's resident therein two years, may become members on election by the committee and payment of the initiation fee of three hundred dollars and the yearly due of 75 dollars.²⁷

²³ Macleod, *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects*, 78.

²⁴ Macleod, *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects*, 78.

²⁵ Macleod, *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects*, 78.

²⁶ Adam, *Buying Respectability*, 97.

²⁷ "An Old New Yorker, Clubs – Club Life – Some New York Clubs.," *The Galaxy, A Magazine of Entertaining Reading (1866-1878)*, 08, 1876, 230

Individuals who could afford membership dues still required the committees nomination for which they relied on their identities as “heads of families...the gravest, worthiest, and conservative of men in the community, men who [had] distinguished themselves in law, commerce, or politics.”²⁸ Social clubs were places that “no father, in certain conditions of fortune, would nowadays object to his son joining,” due to the “undoubtedly civilizing” and “restraining influence” of club life for young men.²⁹ However, the majority of elite women were dependent upon household patriarchs who managed their personal finances and expected demeanors compliant with traditional female roles. Elite women’s inability to access their own finances prevented them from being able to pay membership initiation fees and annual dues. Furthermore, notions of private and public spheres prevented women from building reputations that could be “identified with the great social, industrial, and commercial movements of the day.”³⁰ The use of gendered membership qualifications prevented elite women’s participation in the “complex system of monetary and nonmonetary exchanges” that were constructing America’s cultural society.³¹

The principle and institutional exclusion of elite women from the developing cultural world encouraged women to embrace gendered definitions of art. As art became increasing central to elite’s social status and cultural institutions, distinctions between visual art forms transformed hierarchal definitions. The separation of fine and decorative arts was a key component of the decorative arts movement:

Rather than emulating man's cultural pursuits the decorative arts movement raised traditional household crafts to a loftier, but still subordinate status among the fine arts. Rather than fostering exclusively aesthetic aims, it also highlighted more familiar

²⁸ “An Old New Yorker, Clubs – Club Life – Some New York Clubs.” 232; Charles Page Bryan, “The Clubs of Chicago.” *The Cosmopolitan; a Monthly Illustrated Magazine (1886-1907)*, 07, 1889, 211.

²⁹ “An Old New Yorker, Clubs – Club Life – Some New York Clubs,” 232.

³⁰ “An Old New Yorker, Clubs – Club Life – Some New York Clubs,” 232.

³¹ McCarthy, *Women’s Culture*, 33.

charitable goals. Rather than addressing the needs of the community as a whole, it's steeped its appeal in the interests of women and the imperatives of the domestic sphere and ingenious reiteration of women's traditional roles.³²

The distinction between men and women's "cultural pursuits" influenced the construction of defined cultural spaces for men and women: fine arts for men and decorative arts for women.³³

Fine arts remained within the male domain which included painting, sculpture, and architecture as its primary styles. While decorative arts "in a simple and broad sense covers all art which enriches and beautifies architecture," they must be the "direct product of the human hand."³⁴

This definition, though vague, includes artistic crafts closely associated female denoted skills including interior design, embroidery, needlework, quilting, fine china painting, and ceramic work. The positioning of "the lesser, or as they are called the *Decorative Arts*" as the one which "enriches" male art forms mirrored society's expectation for women to embody a supporting role.³⁵ Though the decorative arts movement worked to raise women's crafts to a "loftier" level they did remain in a "subordinate status to fine arts" conforming to and reasserting the patriarchal structures foundational to America's high cultural society.

Contemporary literature published in the 1880s developed a language for the separation of decorative and fine arts. The establishment of lending libraries became essential to the dissemination of information published in national periodicals and books. Women's organizations, including those focused on fine and decorative arts sent their "books anywhere in the United States" contributing generalized interpretations, understandings, and appreciations of art.³⁶ The "distribut[ion of] information concerning various art industries" provided women

³² McCarthy, *Women's Culture*, 46.

³³ McCarthy, *Women's Culture*, 46.

³⁴ Candance Wheeler. *Household Art*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893), 194.; Lucy Crane. *...Art and the Formation of Taste: Six Lectures* (Boston: Chautauqua Press, 1887), 36.

³⁵ William Morris. *Hopes and Fears for Arts*, (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1882), 1.

³⁶ McCarthy, *Women's Culture*, 51.

across the US with guides to lace making, needlework, china painting, and interior decorating, to name a few, but more importantly the contemporary literature publicized a language for women to claim decorative arts as a part of the female domain.³⁷ These published works contributed to and lead the larger conversation about the hierarchal order of the art forms and their place within gender spheres. William Morris and Lucy Crane’s published influential books on visual arts, clarified the distinction between art forms, and positioned fine above decorative arts. Candace Wheeler and her female counterparts built upon these early works to directly correlate decorative arts to the domestic female sphere. Collectively contemporary literature actively participated in the construction of a social ideology that dictated women’s absence from the realm of fine arts and defined a “narrow” avenue for female participation through the heavily regulated decorative arts.³⁸

William Morris was one of the first experts to publish a series of essays on the relationship between fine and decorative arts. Morris though an exceptional advocate for the decorative arts movement and the United States, worked to assert the contemporary notion that “men create and women copy.”³⁹ In 1882, Morris published *Hopes and Fears For Art*, warning of the separation of decorative and fine arts:

it is only in later times, and under the most intricate conditions of life that they have fallen apart from one another; and I hold that, when they are so parted, it is ill for the Arts altogether: the lesser ones become trivial, mechanical, unintelligent, incapable of resisting the changes pressed upon them by fashion and dishonestly; while the greater, however they may be practiced for a while by the men of great minds and wonder-working hands, unhelped by the lesser, unhelped by each other, are sure to lose their dignity of popular arts...⁴⁰

³⁷ Candace Wheeler, *Yesterdays in a busy life*. (New York: Harper & Brothers, c1918), 216.

³⁸ Candace Wheeler, *Yesterdays in a busy life*, 215.

³⁹ As cited in: McCarthy *Women’s Culture*, 47.

⁴⁰ William Morris. *Hopes and Fears for Arts*, 2.

Morris's controversial characterization of fine arts dependence on decorative arts provides a indication of elites' interpretation of the decorative art as a "lesser" art form.⁴¹ The description of decorative arts as "trivial, mechanical, unintelligent incapable of resisting the changes pressed upon them" directly ties their worth and existence to the practice and development of fine arts.⁴² Additionally, the use of "trivial" and "unintelligent" oppose the masculine definition of collecting, indicated that decorative arts were not worth acquisition nor collection unless for the purpose of helping fine arts.⁴³ Whereas the discussion that fine arts "may be practice for a while" indicates their ability to maintain a meaningful presence within the art realm without the consistent support of other visual art forms.⁴⁴ Though Morris did not define decorative arts as the work of women, he did particularly cite fine arts as belonging to the "men of great minds and wonder working hands".⁴⁵ Morris's concept that decorative and fine arts, "unhelped by each other" would "lose their dignity of popular arts" directly opposed society's growing association of the fine and decorative arts place within their respective male and female spheres.⁴⁶ In order to, warn against the separation of fine and decorative arts Morris relied on distinctions between the art forms unintentionally asserting the hierarchal order of visual art forms.

Five years later, in 1887, Lucy Crane also separated fine and decorative art by citing decorative arts "lesser" status through her correlation of the formation of art to the evolution of man.⁴⁷ Crane linked decorative arts to the secondary stage of human development, one where the "savage, the barbarous man" develops an "artistic sense."⁴⁸ Decorative arts is placed before the

⁴¹ William Morris. *Hopes and Fears for Arts*, 1.

⁴² William Morris. *Hopes and Fears for Arts*, 2.

⁴³ William Morris. *Hopes and Fears for Arts*, 2.

⁴⁴ William Morris. *Hopes and Fears for Arts*, 2.

⁴⁵ William Morris. *Hopes and Fears for Arts*, 2.

⁴⁶ William Morris. *Hopes and Fears for Arts*, 2.

⁴⁷ William Morris. *Hopes and Fears for Arts*, 1.

⁴⁸ Lucy Crane. *...Art and the Formation of Taste: Six Lectures*, 8.

development of fine arts as ““decoration”” is the ““first spiritual want of a barbarous man.””⁴⁹

The origins of decorative arts are described as man’s ability to learn “to decorate whatever he wears or uses and to find a pleasure in the object beyond its use.”⁵⁰ In correlating decorative arts to a premature human form they become an educational stepping stone men use to form their “artistic sense.”⁵¹ Crane’s analysis solidifies decorative arts as a “lesser” and subordinate art form by constructing it as a gateway “to an advanced art:”

This stage must be reached before any records of the past, any legend, story, or song, any monuments, or noble buildings, any representations of gods or heroes, any rites of religion, can be conceived or produced; and thus time brings about the birth of the fine arts (our third stage) - ... painting, sculpture, and architecture.⁵²

Like Morris, Crane did not specifically associate a gender with decorative arts, she did suggest that since decorative arts came before that of fine arts they require less skill, knowledge, and intellect than the crafts within the fine art umbrella. Crane positioned decorative arts as an art form that men passed through to attain “an extended sense of beauty” for their use in the creation of fine arts.⁵³ The association of “painting, sculpture, and architectures” with the third and final stage of the evolution of man asserts fine arts as the most evolved and refined art forms.⁵⁴ In so doing, Crane restricts fine arts to individuals of the highest “intellect,” giving elite white men greater access and prominence over “painting, sculpture, and architectures.”⁵⁵ The establishment of decorative arts as a rudimentary artistic form furthered society’s perception that objects d’art were of a less refined and educated status than that of fine arts. The differentiation of intellectual

⁴⁹ Lucy Crane. *...Art and the Formation of Taste: Six Lectures*, 8.

⁵⁰ Lucy Crane. *...Art and the Formation of Taste: Six Lectures*, 8.

⁵¹ Lucy Crane. *...Art and the Formation of Taste: Six Lectures*, 8.

⁵² William Morris. *Hopes and Fears for Arts*, 1.; Lucy Crane. *...Art and the Formation of Taste: Six Lectures*, 8.; Lucy Crane. *...Art and the Formation of Taste*, 10-11.

⁵³ Lucy Crane. *...Art and the Formation of Taste: Six Lectures*, 10.

⁵⁴ Lucy Crane. *...Art and the Formation of Taste*, 11.

⁵⁵ Lucy Crane. *...Art and the Formation of Taste: Six Lectures*, 11.

levels required for decorative and fine arts contribute to the construction of decorative arts unequal and subordinate status.

Candace Wheeler's published work *Household Art* builds upon Morris and Cranes argument developing a language women used to claim decorative arts as their own. Wheeler's 1893 essay *Decorative and Applied Arts* asserts that "the function of decorative arts [was] to assist in making all these different evidences of man's power and ability beautiful."⁵⁶ In using the word "assist" Wheeler's defines decorative arts sum purpose as supporting men's artistic crafts, specifically the fine arts.⁵⁷ The notion of decorative arts as a supporting art form was not new. In Morris's warning of the separation of visual arts he establishes fine arts' inherent reliance on the support of decorative arts to prevent the objects from becoming "dull adjuncts".⁵⁸ While Crane's argument insisted that "before" men could create fine arts they first had to understand the principles and importance of decoration.⁵⁹ Wheeler built upon her predecessors' theories of decorative arts supporting purpose to directly link the visual art form to the female domestic sphere. The assoiation of decorative arts with the "lesser" female sphere was further asserted through Wheeler's establishment of her "principle of subordination."⁶⁰

...where architecture *leads*, decorative art follows. Its first principle then is *subordination*. To be itself and must acknowledge its dependence, and be not only content but proud to be secondary. ...⁶¹

The assertion that "decorative art follows" though may appear to be contradictory to Crane's evolution theory, essentially expands the notion to adapt a circular and infinite formula.⁶² The possible potential of decorative arts becomes bound by the prominence of fine arts. If decorative

⁵⁶ Wheeler, *Household Art*, 194.

⁵⁷ Wheeler, *Household Art*, 194.

⁵⁸ William Morris. *Hopes and Fears for Arts*, 2.

⁵⁹ William Morris. *Hopes and Fears for Arts*, 1.

⁶⁰ Wheeler, *Household Art*, 195.

⁶¹ Wheeler, *Household Art*, 195-196.

⁶² Wheeler, *Household Art*, 195-196.

arts were elevated, so too would fine arts, thereby, enabling the continued growth of decorative arts. Decorative arts “dependence” on fine arts restricts objects d’art from standing independently, mimicking society’s perception of women’s dependent status.⁶³ The parallel between contemporary gender expectation and Wheeler’s “principle of subordination” provides women with language to claim decorative arts as part of their supporting responsibilities.⁶⁴ In so doing, decorative arts takes on an “entirely secondary function” constraining the potential of “all good, lasting, and successful decorative art” to be the supporting actors in the advancement of men’s artistic crafts.⁶⁵ The “hierarchal ranking of fine over decorative arts has strongly gendered connotations,” which elite women embraced in order to claim a space for themselves within the visual arts realm.⁶⁶

Women leveraged their association with household decoration to take the lead in defining the emerging decorative arts movement. In 1892, Candace Wheeler’s essay “The Philosophy of Beauty Applied to House Interiors” in *Household Art*, provided guidance on the craft of interior decoration, including the coloring, tapestry, and furnishing of individual rooms based on location of windows and the designated purpose. Intended for upper-class women, Wheeler’s essay placed decorative art crafts at the center of women’s responsibility of home making. The designation that a “perfectly furnished house is a crystallization of the culture, habits, and the tastes of the family,” directly correlates the importance of home making to a family’s reputation.⁶⁷ Interior designs incorporation of decorative arts allows women to claim a superior expertise over the art form:

⁶³ Wheeler, *Household Art*, 195-196.

⁶⁴ Wheeler, *Household Art*, 195-196.

⁶⁵ Wheeler, *Household Art*, 196-197.

⁶⁶ Stammers, *Women Collectors and Cultural Philanthropy*, 14.

⁶⁷ Wheeler, *The Philosophy of Beauty Applied to House Interiors* in *Household Art*, 14.

The instinct of home-making which abides in the minds of women at the present period in America is greatly stimulated by a very general artistic impulse... in short, the material creations of the true artist-artisan - is an almost universal feminine experience.⁶⁸

In the connection of “home-making” directly to the female mind, Wheeler asserted interior decorating as an inherent capability of women’s.⁶⁹ The furnishing of one’s home becomes more than a fundamental talent women possessed, but one they found the “keenest enjoyment in the natural exercise of those gifts.”⁷⁰ The making of a furnished home became a task the “heart feminine will burn to make them [(their homes)] as attractive as possible.”⁷¹ In assuming interior decorating was a true female desire a broader connection is “drawn between women and domesticity,” expanding women’s traditional household responsibilities to include household decorating.⁷² As interior decorating became a “barometer of moral character” the “special sensitivity and skills” women possessed as wives and mothers took on an additional importance as home-making was linked to parental responsibilities.⁷³ It was believed that children who grow up in homes of aesthetic taste will attain an “unconscious superiority which distinguishes men or women whose cultivation has been radial and unlessoned.”⁷⁴ Because child rearing belongs at the heart of the domestic sphere women’s role as mothers required them if they couldn’t “afford a decorator or furnisher and order in a home,” to “read all the articles on decoration and furnishing that journal, magazine, or trade paper supply.”⁷⁵ For the most elite women their exquisite fulfillment of their interior decorating responsibility gave them reason and grounds to claim a prominent position as art collectors. Elite women embraced their newfound role as “female

⁶⁸ Wheeler, *The Philosophy of Beauty Applied to House Interiors* in *Household Art*, 13.

⁶⁹ Wheeler, *The Philosophy of Beauty Applied to House Interiors* in *Household Art*, 13.

⁷⁰ Wheeler, *The Philosophy of Beauty Applied to House Interiors* in *Household Art*, 13.

⁷¹ Florence Morse, “About Furnishings” in *Household Art*, 175.

⁷² Stammers, *Women Collectors and Cultural Philanthropy*, 17.

⁷³ Stammers, *Women Collectors and Cultural Philanthropy*, 18.

⁷⁴ Wheeler, “The Philosophy of Beauty Applied to House Interiors” in *Household Art*, 14.

⁷⁵ Florence Morse, “About Furnishings in *Household Art*,” 175.

collectors [who] happily explored both [(fine and decorative arts)], crossing back and forth between the two fields with breezy self-confidence.”⁷⁶

Elite women’s role as interior decorators enabled them to insert themselves into the family and class enterprise of art collecting. The rise of America’s first “private ‘palaces’” became a significant driving force “of the most strongly pronounced tendencies of [the] time,” the domestication of art.⁷⁷ American elites’ believed “domestic spaces... to be singularly revealing of an individual’s identity, no matter their sex” characterizing the display of fine and decorative arts within private residences as material manifestations of the family’s gentility, refinement, and cultured taste.⁷⁸ The process of “curating the interior” required elite families to acquire and form vast private collections of fine and decorative arts.⁷⁹ The decisions men and women made regarding the collection and arrangement of art within their home collectively spoke to the families “aesthetic intelligence,” however, when viewed individually they contributed to society’s distinctions between men and women’s collecting practices.⁸⁰ Even though interior decorating was increasingly being incorporated into women’s domestic sphere, the houses of America’s elite were decorated by men and women, a practice which can be deciphered from studying the arrangement of objects. Gender distinction between elite men and women’s decorating methods are often explicitly clear: male decorated domestic spaces exuded an “impersonal” and categorical impression deeply contrasting the “intimate and expressive” environment women curated.⁸¹ Men often complied with the “rational principles of selection and classification” displaying their collections through a similar organizational arrangement seen

⁷⁶ Stammers, *Women Collectors and Cultural Philanthropy*, 17.

⁷⁷ McCarthy, *Women’s Culture*, 45.; “[Editorial] Rise of Art in the Household,” *The Art Amateur*, Jun., 1879, 1.

⁷⁸ Stammers, *Women Collectors and Cultural Philanthropy*, 18.

⁷⁹ Stammers, *Women Collectors and Cultural Philanthropy*, 18.

⁸⁰ Cicerone., “Private Galleries,” *The Art Amateur*, Jun., 1879, 6.

⁸¹ Macleod, *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects*, 9.

within public institutions of the time.⁸² In the sketches of the William Henry and Anna Breck Aspinwall's art gallery, the arrangement of fine arts and the rooms' architectural components clearly prioritized leaving the room almost entirely void of the decorative arts, except for a small chair positioned in the center of the room.⁸³ This aligned with Macleod's analysis of Mr. William H Vanderbilt's picture gallery indicating a representative practice among elite men to savor



⁸² Macleod, *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects*, 9.

⁸³ "Modern and old master picture galleries, William Henry and Anna Breck Aspinwall residence, New York," illustrated in *Harper's Weekly*, February 26, 1859, 133. Photo: HarperWeek LLC.

“paintings and sculptures as representatives of the higher arts” and segregate “them from the decorative arts.”⁸⁴ The Aspinwall’s and Mr. W H Vanderbilt’s picture gallery was strikingly different to the image of Mrs. W H Vanderbilt’s “boudoir” where the decorative art objects of furniture, tapestries, vases, and porcelain figures “blended together... with paintings” to adorn the structural features of the room in excess.⁸⁵ The bottom left image is Isabella Stewart Gardner’s drawing room in 1900, which shows a similar combination of objects d’art and fine arts as within Mrs. Vanderbilt’s boudoir.⁸⁶ The contrast between the “flat and hard-edged” look of male decorated spaces to the “three-dimensional” web of decorative decisions women made to craft an “independent work of art” is outstanding.⁸⁷ Men seem to have preferred the strict organizational arrangement of fine arts, entirely separate from decorative arts. Comparatively, as women created their own expertise in art they insisted that objects d’art and the fine arts were best intermixed in close proximity. The clear differentiation in men and women’s aesthetic decisions was often noted in visitors’ descriptions of elite’s residences. Additionally, the integration of fine and decorative arts in women’s household spaces indicates an increasing acceptability for elite women to work with the fine arts in the late nineteenth century. Elite women’s successful embodiment of their interior decorating role enabled them to gain recognition for their work as art collectors, regardless of the visual art form.

Elite women, like their male counterparts, had opportunities to travel abroad, enabling them to build strong relationships with influential artists, collectors, and art dealers bolstering the

⁸⁴ Macleod, *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects*, 9.

⁸⁵ Macleod, *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects*, 9.; “Mr. W. H. Vanderbilt’s Picture Gallery” in *Artistic Houses: being a series of interior views of a number of the most beautiful and celebrated homes in the United States: with a description of the art treasures contained therein.*, (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1883-1884).; Mrs. W H Vanderbilt’s Boudoir in *Artistic houses, 1883-1884*.

⁸⁶ Thomas E. Marr and Son, 152 Beacon St. Drawing Room, 1900, gelatin sliver photograph (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum)

⁸⁷ Macleod, *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects*, 9-10.

formation of their private collections. The networks' elite women formed while abroad became essential to elite women's acquisition processes. Elite women's "were [often] guided by connoisseurs of the caliber of Sara Hallowell and Mary Cassatt" who connected them with living European artist and ensured the quality and value of their acquisitions.⁸⁸ Hallowell was an early advocate for French Impressionist work guiding elite women collectors like Bertha Palmer and Louisine Havemeyer's to the work of Degas, Renoir, and Monet. Elite women "who invested in the works of living artist significantly reduced the threat of fraud. They also acquired these works at relatively reasonable prices, especially when they were willing to gamble on artists in the early stages of their careers."⁸⁹ By embracing the risk of collecting relatively unknown artists elite women carved out a unique space for themselves in art collectorship and patronage with Impressionist art. In Bertha Palmer's search for a muralist for the 1893 Columbian Exposition Women's Building, she wrote to Hallowell asking for recommendations on women painters. Following Hallowell's recommendation Cassatt was selected though at the time "she was known in America mostly to those in the circle of her good friend Louisine Havemeyer."⁹⁰ The correspondences Cassatt and Hallowell shared with each other and elite women collectors like Palmer, and Havemeyer are extensive. The pieces of advice and requests these women shared throughout their letters reveals the social network elite women created in their entrance to cultural society. The extent to which Hallowell and Cassatt connected elite women collectors is a direct correlation of their ability "to win artists like Monet and Degas, Manet and Renoir a central place in America's emerging aesthetic canon" as they facilitated the acquisition of

⁸⁸ McCarthy, *Women's Culture*, 122.

⁸⁹ McCarthy, *Women's Culture*, 122.

⁹⁰ Carolyn Kinder Carr, *Sara Tyson Hallowell: Pioneer Curator and Art Advisor in the Gilded Age*. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2019), 117.

artwork that upon donation to cultural institutions became “extremely influential in the broadening of the American audience for Impressionist works.”⁹¹

In the early 1890s elite’s private collections started to become cultural spectacles, prompting public records to increasingly acknowledge elite women’s contributions as art collectors. Elite women’s homes became the venues for them to attain social reputations like “the most faultless hostess in the city” or “the head... of ‘the smart set’ of Boston.”⁹² Such women sought to be known as a “genius for entertaining” a responsibility elite women carried out within their homes.⁹³ The hosting of “regular entertainments” including “dinners, luncheons, receptions, afternoon teas... [and] musicale[s]” invited the public into women’s private residences granting them the opportunity to see family’s amassed collections.⁹⁴ The dual identities elite women fully embodied positioned them to become “social leaders” capable of contributing to “charitable and philanthropic activities” as an extension of their domestic purview.⁹⁵ In welcoming the public into their homes, elite women made their collections become accessible to contemporary critics:

The willingness to expose, too, is evidently increasing among American owners, in obedience to the same ameliorating spirit of intelligence which has purified the collections. ...Collectors now know, the best information, that they possess pictures and statues which have stood the highest tests anywhere to be had in need fear no fair examination in art criticism, ...⁹⁶

Their “willingness” to share their collections with public indicated their own confidence in the value and prestige of their private collections. The perception that Gilded Age collections had

⁹¹ McCarthy, *Women’s Culture*, 122.

⁹² “Society Leaders: Mrs. Theodore A. Havemeyer.,” *Godey’s Magazine (1892-1898)*, vol. 126, no. 752, 02, 1893, pp. 229.; “Mrs. John L Gardner: Snap Shots of the Famous Social Leader and Her Husband...,” *The Boston Sunday Globe*, Apr. 1, 1894, 25.

⁹³ “Society Leaders: Mrs. Theodore A. Havemeyer.,” *Godey’s Magazine (1892-1898)*, vol. 126, no. 752, 02, 1893, pp. 229.

⁹⁴ “Mrs. John L Gardner: Snap Shots of the Famous Social Leader and Her Husband...,” *The Boston Sunday Globe*, Apr. 1, 1894, 25.

⁹⁵ “Mrs. John L Gardner: Snap Shots of the Famous Social Leader and Her Husband...,” *The Boston Sunday Globe*, Apr. 1, 1894, 25.; Adam, *Buying Respectability*, 127.

⁹⁶ Cicerone, “Private Galleries,” *The Art Amateur*, Jun., 1879, 6.

been acquired using “Collectors... best information” established a foundation to welcome “fair examinations” from art critics, like Cicerone and Earl Shinn.⁹⁷ However, these “fair examinations” either intentionally or subconsciously utilized contemporary “gender conventions around different types of collecting” in their evaluations.⁹⁸ High society interpretations and criticism of their peers’ collections were rarely recorded in detail and more often than not simply described the home itself. Isabella Stewart Gardner’s home on Beacon Street had “every ledge and surface contained personal treasures” giving “no priority to” one visual art form over another.⁹⁹ However, contemporary articles simply described the Gardner’s home as a “splendid house...where the arrangements, the appointments, the furniture, attendance, and the decorations display sumptuous tastes as well as lavish expenditures.”¹⁰⁰ For Bertha Palmer her “own beautiful home” like a “baronial castle. is as beautiful within as Aladdin’s palace.”¹⁰¹ The public descriptions of elite women’s residence is indicative of the “growing visibility of women’s taste rather than invisibility.”¹⁰² For the handful of elite women who were able to fully move beyond their role as interior decorator their efforts as art collectors paved the way for women’s art connoisseurship and patronage to gain public recognition.

The sale of elite women’s art collections brought female collectorship into the purview of fellow elites and institutions alike. When Mrs. Mary Morgan’s “great collection of treasures” was put up for sale, society perceived the fine and decorative arts belonging to her collections as

⁹⁷ Cicerone., “Private Galleries,” *The Art Amateur*, Jun., 1879, 6.

⁹⁸ Cicerone., “Private Galleries,” *The Art Amateur*, Jun., 1879, 6.; Stammers, *Women Collectors and Cultural Philanthropy*, 16.

⁹⁹ Macleod, *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects*, 89.

¹⁰⁰ “Mrs. John L Gardner: Snap Shots of the Famous Social Leader and Her Husband...,” *The Boston Sunday Globe*, Apr. 1, 1894, 25.

¹⁰¹ Antoinette Van Hoesen Wakeman, “Mrs. Potter Palmer,” *Harper’s Bazaar (1867 – 1912)*, Jan. 9, 1892, 25.; “Mrs. Potter Palmer of Chicago,” *Godey’s Magazine (1892-1898)*, May 1893, 126.

¹⁰² Macleod, *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects*, 54.

prestigious.¹⁰³ Over “100,000 previewed... Morgan’s collection before it was sold at auction,” to which “over 6000 applications for tickets for admission” indicating the “widespread interest” the American public had in her collection.¹⁰⁴ Her collection was known as “great,” “remarkable,” and “extraordinary,” as well as “certainly the largest, most varied and most valuable ever offered at auction in New York.”¹⁰⁵ The auction included some of the most well-known and highly regarded individuals in the art world including “Mrs. W. K Vanderbilt..., Mrs. William Astor..., Mrs. Pierre Lorillard..., and a hundred other ladies,” countless men, and the American Art Galleries, an assemblage of people which revealed the prestige of the collection.¹⁰⁶ Critics claimed that Morgan’s “taste had very little training” and that “her passion for collecting amounted to a mania, and, like other people with manias, she made a good many mistakes.”¹⁰⁷ As Macleod persuasively argued, Morgan’s capabilities as an art collector were diminished because she had “vigorously inserted herself into the male discourse of possessive individualism and had claimed an unladylike degree of agency when she entered the marketplace and formed a collection that surpassed those of many of her male peers.”¹⁰⁸ Even as the very public nature of the auction of Morgan’s collection, forced society to recognize elite women as collectors, it simultaneously defined women’s collectorship as “lesser,” or at least unequal to that of their male counterparts.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰³ “Mrs. Morgan’s Treasures,” *Buffalo Courier*, Mar. 6, 1886, 2.

¹⁰⁴ Macleod, *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects*, 45.; “Mrs. Morgan’s Treasures,” *Buffalo Courier*, Mar. 6, 1886, 2.

¹⁰⁵ “High Priced Bric-A-Brac: Sale of the Curious in Mrs. Morgan’s Collection,” *The New York Times*, Mar. 9, 1886, 5.; “Mrs. Morgan’s Treasures,” *Buffalo Courier*, Mar. 6, 1886, 2.; “Mrs. Morgan’s Gems,” *Philadelphia Times*, Feb. 21, 1886, 3.

¹⁰⁶ “High Priced Bric-A-Brac: Sale of the Curious in Mrs. Morgan’s Collection,” *The New York Times*, Mar. 9, 1886, 5.

¹⁰⁷ “Mrs. Morgan’s Treasures,” *Buffalo Courier*, Mar. 6, 1886, 2.;

¹⁰⁸ Macleod, *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects*, 45.

¹⁰⁹ William Morris. *Hopes and Fears for Arts*, 1.

A few elite women were able to extend the contributions they were making as art collectors by becoming art patrons. As elites' domestic spaces became public spectacles, elite women discovered that "collecting for the home could lead to the greater outside world of public engagement."¹¹⁰ As cultural institutions developed in the late 1880s, museums began to focus on the growth of institutional collections and funding giving way to a new form of cultural philanthropy – art patronage. Contemporary definitions of art patronage included individuals who participated in the "buying of works of art directly from artist" and "those who by gift or bequest have founded, or helped found and maintain, galleries and museums of pictures, sculptures, or other 'objects of art.'"¹¹¹ The broad definition of art patronage encompasses many forms of benevolent contributions, including, bequests to galleries and museums. Institutional donations became a way for the American "giving class" to assert their "identity and authority" to the public now and in the future.¹¹² Because elite women were "largely protected, buoyed and cocooned by wealth" their contributions as art collectors and patrons were often seen as an extension of their class and family responsibilities to "engage in charitable and philanthropic activities."¹¹³ Miss Catherine Lorillard Wolfe's donation to the Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met) was "Probably the most widely known gift of a woman for art purposes."¹¹⁴ Wolfe's relationship with The Met began with her father's influence and upon her death her bequest "was by far the most important additions made to the possessions of the museum in some years."¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ Macleod, *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects*, 61.

¹¹¹ Helen Everston Smith, "Women as Art Patrons," *Haper's Bazaar (1867 – 1912)*, Jun. 3, 1893, 26.

¹¹² Adams, *Buying Respectability*, 91; *Ibid*, 97.

¹¹³ Baldwin, Joan H., and Anne W. Ackerson. *Women In the Museum: Lessons From the Workplace* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 28.; Adams, *Buying Respectability*, 127.

¹¹⁴ Smith, *Women as Art Patrons*, Jun. 3, 1893, 26.

¹¹⁵ "Galley & Studio: The Metropolitan Museum of Art," *The Art Amateur*, Dec. 1887, 18.

Wolfe's donation consisted of "modern oil paintings... and also [her] water color drawings" which were known as "Evidences of the most advanced 'collectorship:'"¹¹⁶

Her collection of modern paintings is said to be one of the best ever made in this country, and to have cost over half a million dollars. This collection, rivaling the Morgan collection or the Stewart collection, is presented to the Metropolitan Museum.¹¹⁷

In the descriptions of Wolfe's donation to The Met her collections was described as one of the utmost quality, one that "By nature and education she was fitted to select."¹¹⁸ However, this characterization about Wolfe's "nature" is largely in regards to her class, upbringing, and commitment to charitable endeavors.¹¹⁹ It is hard to know how Wolfe's gender identity factored into the praise society gave to her art collectorship and patronage. Unlike Morgan, Wolfe carefully incorporated her art collecting and patronage efforts into a "circumspect routine and charitable donations [that] shielded her from censure."¹²⁰ Wolfe's bequest exemplifies how through gifts of "paintings and endowments to such [art and cultural] institutions, [elite] women and men ensured their names, or the names of their families would be attached to collections and buildings," which were shaping America's cultural society.¹²¹ Donations of fine and decorative arts enabled to public to admire art objects which extended to include "admiration for its donor, who was always clearly identified."¹²² Cultural institutions acceptance of elite women's bequests indicates museums acknowledgment of their *capabilities* as art collectors and patrons.

Despite Wolfe's ability to break through the patriarchal biases of cultural institutions, many elite women's donations were made on behalf of their families or confined to the

¹¹⁶ Johnston, John Taylor, and Louis P. di Cesnola. "To the Members of the: Metropolitan Museum of Art." *Annual Report of the Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, no. 18 (1887): 383.; Shinn, *The Art Treasures of America*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Gebbie and Barrie, 1879 -82; repr., New York: Garland, 1977), 3:36.

¹¹⁷ "Catherine Lorillard Wolfe," *The Independent*, Apr. 14, 1887, 39.

¹¹⁸ Smith, *Women as Art Patrons*, Jun. 3, 1893, 26.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 26.

¹²⁰ Macleod, *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects*, 73.

¹²¹ Adams, *Buying Respectability*, 133.

¹²² Adams, *Buying Respectability*, 99.

decorative art sphere. Before the 1890s elite women often perceived their “engagement in cultural philanthropy as fulfilling the wishes of their husbands” or fathers, the “felt obliged... to carry on family traditions.”¹²³ Therefore, few elite women took on a benefactor role for cultural institutions and those who did “make donations tended to bestow decorative arts, rather than paintings or cash.”¹²⁴ Wolfe was not alone in the bequest of women’s collections to art museums and galleries: Mrs. U. S. Coles left “the costly collection of art tapestries and other art objects” and Mrs. J. J. Astor made the “bequest of rare laces.”¹²⁵ While many other elite women donated extensive decorative art collections:

Another Philadelphia woman who has recognized this truth is Mrs. Bloomfield Moore, whose generosity in many ways has caused her name to be widely known and loved. Her rich and varied collection of objects of art is at home in two large rooms of Memorial Hall. It includes ceramics of various countries and eras, cabinet – work, ivory carvings, specimens of ancient or modern Roman and Florentine jewelry, laces, textile fabrics, ancient glass – especially some beautiful specimens of Venetian and Bohemian wares – wood carvings of much curios or artistic interest and value, bookbindings of wood and leather, illuminated missals, silverware, and fine old Flemish tapestries.¹²⁶

Elite women leveraged the expertise they were assigned through the correlation of decorative arts to the domestic sphere to assert the quality and prestige of their decorative art collections. In so doing, women like Mrs. Bloomfield Moore were able to bequest impressive collections of decorative art objects to institution, leaving a record of their art collecting and patronage contributions, even if they made the donations were “identified by their husbands name.”¹²⁷ Whether it was personal or institutional preference for elite women to donate objects d’art over fine arts, is a question that remains unanswered. However, the fundamental ability for elite women to donate decorative arts, and even in some circumstances paintings, sculptures, and

¹²³ Adams, *Buying Respectability*, 136; 133.

¹²⁴ Macleod, *Enchanted Lives, Enchanted Objects*, 64.

¹²⁵ Smith, *Women as Art Patrons*, Jun. 3, 1893, 26.

¹²⁶ Smith, *Women as Art Patrons*, Jun. 3, 1893, 26.

¹²⁷ Adams, *Buying Respectability*, 134.

financial contributions signifies elite women's continued ability to insert themselves into cultural society, a landscape they were actively being excluded from.

Monetary contributions to cultural institutions became a pinnacle of cultural philanthropy for elite women. Throughout 1880s and 1890s women “began to donate sums of an ever-increasing scale” to art and cultural institutions.¹²⁸ Wolfe's donation of “one hundred and forty-three [pictures] strong” was made alongside “the bequest of two hundred thousand for its maintenance and increase.”¹²⁹ Wolfe was among the exceptionally few women who had attained enough wealth to give direct financial contributions to cultural institutions. However, an article published by *Harper's Bazaar* indicated that American elite women gave “for art purposes alone, sums which are estimated to amount, in the aggregated, to not less than five millions of dollars.”¹³⁰ The article does state that their estimate of the financial contributions women have made is likely lower than the actual quantity of women's benevolent gifts because many were made in “smaller cities and towns, which gifts, though of much local value, benefit but limited circles.”¹³¹ It is challenging to decipher the validity of this estimation of women's monetary contributions to art as late nineteenth-century women were “still considered economically dependent.”¹³² Therefore, most women's donations, regardless of class, were “subsequently not viewed as a product of their own productive activity,” by themselves or receiving institutions.¹³³ Because women's monetary donations were often hidden or masked by anonymity or family names, the quantity donated is relatively unknown; however the few women, like Wolfe whose donations became public representations of benevolence, speaks widely to their ability to bestow

¹²⁸ As cited in Adams, *Buying Respectability*, 129.

¹²⁹ Sophia Antoinette Walker, “Fine Arts: The Painting Master in the Wolfe Collection,” *The Independent*, Aug. 2, 1894, 46.

¹³⁰ Smith, *Women as Art Patrons*, Jun. 3, 1893, 26.

¹³¹ Smith, *Women as Art Patrons*, Jun. 3, 1893, 26.

¹³² Adams, *Buying Respectability*, 129.

¹³³ Adams, *Buying Respectability*, 129.

financial gifts to cultural institutions. Only the wealthiest and most elite women were provided with the means and opportunity to break into cultural society as art collectors and patrons, however their efforts resembled the potential possibilities for upper- and middle-class women involved in art associations.

The continuous and ongoing exclusion of women from the art and cultural world prompted the establishment of new art associations in the late 1870s and 1880s, associations that would be more hospitable to women collectors. To move beyond the confines of home and family, leisure women (those of some wealth, but not within the wealthiest and most elite circles) used their religious responsibilities to charity and “exploit[ed] gender stereotypes” to attain levels of mobility and opportunities similar to those of their elite counterparts.¹³⁴ The development of women’s social clubs, organizations, and art associations became the perfect outlet for:

the idle rich of to-day [who encompassed] women whose families have grown up, so that they are largely relieved of their household responsibilities and occupation. Such women have much time, money and executive ability... These women finding their domestic occupation gone, drift quite naturally into club life; and clubs made up of this class are, as a rule, of a useful and beneficent nature.¹³⁵

The privileges associated with leisure women’s class status afforded them considerable amounts of “idle” time to move into the public sphere in ways society deemed acceptable.¹³⁶ Women’s organizations, particularly those formed “in the spirit of radiant philanthropy and the desire to help those who are trying to help themselves,” became a respectable and desirable space for elite

¹³⁴ Adams, *Buying Respectability*, 127.

¹³⁵ Mrs. Russel Sagem, Olivia Sage, “Opportunities and Responsibilities of Leisured Women” *The North American Review (1821-1940)*, 11, 1905, 712,

¹³⁶ Mrs. Russel Sagem, Olivia Sage, “Opportunities and Responsibilities of Leisured Women” *The North American Review (1821-1940)*, 11, 1905, 712.

women to spend their time.¹³⁷ Women's art associations became some of first social organizations to be "managed by women, patronized by women, and [to have] their benefits [go] out to women."¹³⁸ These early art associations embraced society's acceptance of benevolent organizations to establishes organizations specifically for women to engage, discuss, and learn about art.

Decorative art associations became avenues for leisure women to contribute to the development of art and culture. In the late 1870s, "the first women's art associations primarily sought to educate the public about the breadth of female artistry."¹³⁹ Art association founders adopted revised versions of Civil War Sanitary Commissions to create "new models for postwar female largesse" to formulate their organizational structures and operations.¹⁴⁰ Driven by the "noticeable inferiority" of decorative arts in America, during the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, art associations became platforms for women to directly engage in elevating the quality of decorative arts to better compete with society's regard of fine arts.¹⁴¹ Art associations employed an organizational strategy that blend together "charity and artistic aims" to fulfill their mission of raising "traditional household crafts to the level of fine arts."¹⁴² The establishment of the three key art associations of New York: the New York Society Decorative Arts (Decorative Art Society), The Ladies Art Association, and The New York Exchange for Women's Work (The Exchange) became the foundation and platform for an expansive network of women's art associations that developed across the United States. "Each [New York art association]

¹³⁷ Adam, *Buying Respectability*, 127.; "Fine Arts: Womanly Work for Woman," *The Independent ...Devoted to the Consideration of Politics, Social and Economic Tendencies, History, Literature, and the Arts* (1848-1921), Jan 05, 1882, 9.

¹³⁸ *Fine Arts: Womanly Work for Woman*, 9.

¹³⁹ McCarthy, *Women's Culture*, 101.

¹⁴⁰ McCarthy, *Women's Culture*, 40.

¹⁴¹ "The Society of Decorative Art: (New York)," *Scribner's Monthly* (1870-1881), Sep., 1881, 700.

¹⁴² McCarthy, *Women's Culture*, 43-44.

occupie[d] a field of its own” working to aid and benefit middle and working class women by providing them with training, education, employment, and exposure to the techniques and skills of decorative arts.¹⁴³ The first and “perhaps best known” of the art associations was the Decorative Art Society, whose primary objectives are the “diffusion of a knowledge of art-work among women and their training in artistic industries [and to] provide a place for the exhibition and sale of art-work.”¹⁴⁴ The Ladies Art Association and The Exchange took on similar aims of “instruction” and to “assist ladies” through “profitable employment” and compensation.¹⁴⁵ However, the significant missions of these early art associations often relied on “entrusting the most aesthetic tasks to the artistic judgement of men.”¹⁴⁶ Even as these art associations provided avenues for women of various classes to contribute to the developing world of art and culture, they were still dependent and restricted by the gendered assumptions ingrained in America’s high culture.

Women’s art associations employed strategies of compensation to elevate the quality decorative arts through women’s efforts from across America. The Exchange paid “\$10,252... to consignees” in one year for the sale of “almost every thing that is useful and beautiful that can be devised by the quick ingenuity of woman’s brain.”¹⁴⁷ Of the “17,566 articles registered for sale, only thirty-seven [had] been rejected” by The Exchange, illustrating the widespread acceptance and promotion of the decorative arts by art associations.¹⁴⁸ The Decorative Art Society provided the “direct return of money for manual labor” selling various household crafts for a range of prices from ten dollars to over one hundred and fifty dollars depending on the crafts quality and

¹⁴³ “Fine Arts: Womanly Work for Woman,” 9.

¹⁴⁴ “Fine Arts: Womanly Work for Woman,” 9.; “The Society of Decorative Art: (New York),” *Scribner’s Monthly (1870-1881)*, Sep., 1881, 703.

¹⁴⁵ *Fine Arts: Womanly Work for Woman*, 9.

¹⁴⁶ McCarthy, *Women’s Culture*, 44.

¹⁴⁷ Ellen E. Dickinson, “New York Exchange for Women’s Work,” *The Art Amateur*, Jul., 1879, 35.

¹⁴⁸ Ellen E. Dickinson, “New York Exchange for Women’s Work,” *The Art Amateur*, Jul., 1879, 35.

the time required to make.¹⁴⁹ By compensating women for the submission of decorative arts art associations hoped to “promote the development of remunerative careers for middle-class women.”¹⁵⁰ The promise of compensation encouraged women to practice and refine their skills of embroidery, needlework and china painting enabling art associations to increase quality selectivity:

Every contribution that is sent here is examined by a committee of admission, who decide upon its merits without knowing the name of the author. To witness the impartiality of their decisions, it is related at the rooms – and the fact may be interesting to the hundreds of contributors whose has been rejected – that a member of this committee recently felt obliged to resign, because she had grown familiar with the manner of certain regular contributors and so considered herself incapacitated from serving longer.¹⁵¹

The use of managers or a “committee of admission” to determine the “merits” of received women’s crafts enabled art associations to standardize the characteristics of quality decorative arts. In so doing, the role decorative arts held within the art world began to slowly gain value. By elevating the standards of decorative arts, women were able to increase the potential for their crafts to be viewed in public exhibition spaces.

Art associations increased the visibility of decorative arts in the late nineteenth century. Societies focus on “popular education, including a variety of efforts to upgrade public taste thorough publications, lectures, exhibitions, and lending libraries,” encouraged women to continue to practice and develop their artistic talents.¹⁵² Women worked to elevate their decorative art crafts to be of a quality worthy of being selected for exhibition. The competitive nature surrounding the making of decorative arts enabled decorative arts exhibitions that “a few years ago any exhibition at all of this kind would have been an impossibility.”¹⁵³ Art associations

¹⁴⁹ “How Art Renumerates Women: Embroidery,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, Dec., 1882, 15.

¹⁵⁰ McCarthy, *Women’s Culture*, 51.

¹⁵¹ “The Society of Decorative Art: (New York)” *Scribner’s Monthly (1870-1881)*, Sep., 1881, 704.

¹⁵² McCarthy, *Women’s Culture*, 51.

¹⁵³ “The Society of Decorative Art: (New York)” *Scribner’s Monthly (1870-1881)*, Sep., 1881, 704.

exhibitions became a space “full of interest to the student, the connoisseur, and those who simply desire to be entertained,” where decorative arts could be seen in the same setting as those of the fine arts displayed in museums.¹⁵⁴ Decorative art exhibitions became a way for women to “began to master the aesthetic tasks formerly ceded to men, planning and staging exhibits of their own.”¹⁵⁵ Society women went about the process of selecting “a number of pieces executed by the society and a remarkable collection of loan embroideries” for the Decorative Art Society’s 1881 exhibition.¹⁵⁶ The work “executed by the society” was likely crafts made by women of the leisure or middle-class who were members of the art associations, while pieces from elite’s private collections made up the exhibitions “loan embroiders.”¹⁵⁷ The variety of ways in which decorative art exhibitions enabled women of various classes to elevate and display their crafts increased the general presence of decorative arts within the developing cultural world.

When elite women loaned their collections to association exhibitions, they became effective and public contributors to the development of art and cultural world. The Decorative Art Society exhibition in 1881 featured a “loan collection... [of] the choicest specimens out of private collections of this city [New York] and of Boston” including table covers, venetian lace, embroidery, clothing.¹⁵⁸ Loan exhibitions became an avenue for “women who would later be numbered among the country’s most celebrated art collectors” to exhibit early pieces from their collections.¹⁵⁹ The decorative art items were loaned to the Decorative Art Society’s exhibition by both men and women as listed in the *Art Amateur* article, the most notable of which was Mrs. Abram S. Hewitt. The presence of women’s names alongside that of men as collectors for a

¹⁵⁴ Mary Gay Humphreys, “Art Needlework: The Decorative Art Society’s Exhibition,” *The Art Amateur*, Jun. 1881.

¹⁵⁵ McCarthy, *Women’s Culture*, 52.

¹⁵⁶ Humphreys, “Art Needlework: The Decorative Art Society’s Exhibition,” *The Art Amateur*, Jun. 1881.

¹⁵⁷ Humphreys, “Art Needlework: The Decorative Art Society’s Exhibition,” *The Art Amateur*, Jun. 1881.

¹⁵⁸ Humphreys, “Art Needlework: The Decorative Art Society’s Exhibition,” *The Art Amateur*, Jun. 1881.

¹⁵⁹ McCarthy, *Women’s Culture*, 51-52.

public exhibition indicates society's increasing acceptance of women as art collectors and their collections. Outside of the Decorative Art Society, other loan exhibitions also accepted objects 'art and fine arts from women's collections. In 1893 the American Fine Arts Society, opened the "most important [exhibition] of its kind ever held on this continent" displaying some of the "rarest collection of art treasures" possessed by American collectors at the time.¹⁶⁰ Some of the most renowned works of this exhibition included masterpieces "forming part... of Mrs. Blodgett's" collection and "Mr. Havemeyer's famous Rembrandt's."¹⁶¹ Though the contribution of the Rembrandt particularly gives credit to Mr. Havemeyer, Mrs. Louisine Havemeyer was an avid collector who often acquired art in both partnership and independence from her husband. Havemeyer opens her autobiography by stating "I began collecting before I was sixteen and I am now over sixty and am still collecting" asserting her clear status as an art collector.¹⁶² As for the nature of Havemeyer's partnership with her husband she describes their art acquisitions as belonging to "our private collections" and stated that Mr. Havemeyer supported her desire to write a "Collector's Manual telling them all I knew."¹⁶³ Thereby, Mrs. Havemeyer was likely apart of the loaning of the masterpieces to the exhibition though her involvement was hidden behind her husband's name. In the acceptance of items from women's collections as loans to public exhibitions, women's role as art collectors became increasingly publicized despite their contributors to the development of art and culture remaining obscured.

During the Gilded Age, few women were able break into America's deeply exclusionary cultural society. The construction of art collecting as a masculine practice worked to exclude elite women from the cultural society both institutionally and based on principle. But some

¹⁶⁰ "A Generous Patron of American Art – A Great Exhibition.," *Christian Advocate*, Feb. 16th, 1893.

¹⁶¹ "A Generous Patron of American Art – A Great Exhibition.," *Christian Advocate*, Feb. 16th, 1893.

¹⁶² Louisine Waldron Elder Havemeyer, *Sixteen to Sixty: Memoirs of a Collector*, 1.

¹⁶³ Havemeyer, *Sixteen to Sixty*, 5-8.

women did leverage their class and gender identities to shape the developing landscape of art and culture. Some women, like Betha Palmer, Isabella Stewart Gardner, and Catherine Lorillard Wolfe pushed their way into the male sphere of art collecting and patronage. While others helped to claim a new specifically gendered version of arts: decorative arts. In contemporary literature's correlation of decorative arts to the female domestic sphere, elite women embraced their newfound responsibility as interior designers. Elite women participation in "curating the interior" of their residences to acquire America's first private collections.¹⁶⁴ The collections they amassed symbolized the family's respectability masking elite women's growing cultural authority outside the accepted gender roles of the time. Even as women's roles as female collectors expanded into art patronage through the donation, sale, and loaning of their objects, women's efforts to shape cultural society continued to be diminished. For those women whose class status and gender identity limited their involvement in elite's cultural realm, art associations became avenues for them to claim decorative arts as their own. Yet, women like Bertha Palmer, Isabella Stewart Gardner, Catharine Lorillard Wolfe, and Mary Morgan, leverage the power and affluence their wealth and gender roles afforded them to ensure their efforts as collectors and patrons were seen as more than fancies.

¹⁶⁴ Stammers, *Women Collectors and Cultural Philanthropy*, 18.

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