

## **The House Beautiful - Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetic Interior**

**18 July 2000 to 21 January 2001**

***"I find it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china..."***

Oscar Wilde was the Aesthetic Movement personified. He helped it to flourish, and when he died in November 1900, ostracised and disgraced, the Movement died with him. This special exhibition, which marks the centenary of his death, will locate Wilde in the context of London's cultural scene in the late nineteenth-century and trace his influence in creating the notion of the 'house beautiful'.

The effect of the Movement on middle-class interiors will be examined in detail, with furniture, wallpapers, textiles and decorative arts displayed in the manner described in the numerous books and manuals on decoration published from the 1860s onwards, and drawing on the evidence of contemporary furnishing catalogues, photographs and paintings. The exhibition will focus on this popular expression of the Aesthetic Movement, whereas most previous studies have concentrated on the artists and designers who created it, and on the wealthy elite who patronised them. Here, in tune with the purpose of the Geffrye Museum, the emphasis is on the urban, and especially London, middle-class.

The origins of the Aesthetic Movement lay in reactions against the perceived excesses of mid nineteenth-century art and decoration, exemplified by many of the goods displayed in the Great Exhibition of 1851. Inspired principally by artists like James A McNeill Whistler and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and designers like Christopher Dresser and Edward Godwin, the Movement promoted the notion of 'art for art's sake' and drew heavily on Middle-Eastern and Oriental, especially Japanese, decorative traditions.

The Geffrye's exhibition will show how blue and white china, lacquer screens, Japanese fans and prints, and furniture ebonised in imitation of Japanese style, all contributed to the artistic interior. Islamic influences were most prevalent in ceramics, for example in the decoration of vases and tiles by William de Morgan. In the creation of the 'house beautiful' the dominant feature in reception rooms was typically an elaborate fireplace, often decorated with tiles, surmounted by a high, tiered overmantel, its shelves supporting art pottery and ornaments. Walls were usually divided into dado, filling and frieze, the wallpapers highly patterned and co-ordinated with textiles for curtains and upholstery to achieve an overall effect of harmony. Favoured colours were olive green, peacock blue and gold. Peacocks and their feathers, sunflowers and lilies were all popular motifs used in wallpapers, textiles, terracotta panels, tiles and stained glass.

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Wilde established a reputation as an aesthete while still a student at Oxford, through his mannerisms, unconventional dress and the style with which he furnished his rooms. His famous remark, 'I find it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china' was part of his Oxford myth which earned him notoriety through the now familiar George du Maurier cartoons in *Punch*. A brilliant and witty conversationalist, Wilde was quickly absorbed into London's fashionable artistic circles. His theories on art and interior decoration, which drew heavily on John Ruskin, Walter Pater and William Morris, were disseminated not only in the drawing rooms of the socially elite but also through his lecture tours in America and the United Kingdom.

The combination of Wilde's publicity through the popular press and the wealth of specialist furnishing and decorating manuals helped to stimulate public interest in the new style. The vogue for Queen Anne architecture, exemplified by the Bedford Park estate in West London, designed by Edward Godwin, and later, Richard Norman Shaw, permeated much of the detailing of late nineteenth-century, speculatively-built suburban houses. Manufacturers, too, were quick to follow the new trends in decorative style, labelling their wares as 'art pottery' or 'art furniture' and retailing through stores such as Shoolbred, Whiteley and Liberty. Amongst the most influential suppliers of furniture and furnishings were Morris and Co, whose wallpapers and textiles were especially favoured in artistic interiors.

As the popular demand for art furniture and other goods reached its peak by around 1890, the Aesthetic Movement was already in decline. On his marriage to Constance in 1884, Wilde took a house in Tite Street, Chelsea, and commissioned Godwin to design the interiors. Detailed descriptions survive to provide a fascinating insight into Wilde's highly-developed sense of the 'house beautiful'. For Wilde, though, it proved short-lived. In spite of achieving acclaim and wealth as a playwright he was ruined by his notorious affair with Lord Alfred Douglas and the trials Wilde brought against Douglas's father, the Marquess of Queensberry, which left him bankrupt, imprisoned and ultimately exiled. He never lost his wit, though, as revealed by his comment as he lay dying in a Paris hotel, 'My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or other of us has to go.'

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12/4/2000

For further information or transparencies, please contact Nancy Loader, PR Officer, or Christine Lalumia, Deputy Director.

Notes to Editors/...

## Notes to Editors

1. The exhibition will be accompanied by a book under the same title, written by Charlotte Gere with Lesley Hoskins and published by Lund Humphries in association with the Geffrye Museum. Exploring the origins of the Aesthetic Movement and its influence on the decorative arts, Charlotte Gere traces the people with whom Wilde associated, the artists, architects and designers he admired, and the houses and interiors he was influenced by. Lesley Hoskins, in the final chapter, examines the popular expression of the aesthetic style in middle-class homes, drawing on the published sources as well as contemporary photographs and furniture catalogues. The book offers a comprehensive account of the aesthetic interior across a wide spectrum of late nineteenth-century society, illustrated with a selection of the most evocative images of a truly decorative style.

For press copies of the book, please contact Helen Kennedy at Lund Humphries on 01252 368598.

2. Public Programme  
A Conference on Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetic Style will be run by the Geffrye, in conjunction with the Victorian Society, on 13 and 14 October. Details on the programme and speakers will be available in June.

A series of evening lectures will be held in the Autumn. Speakers will include Charlotte Gere, Lesley Hoskins and Christopher Wood.

3. Other exhibitions to mark the Oscar Wilde centenary include:  
**The Wilde Years: Oscar Wilde and The Art of his Times** at the Barbican Arts Centre  
5 October 2000 - 14 January 2001  
Contact: Lisa Collins: 020 7638 5403

**Oscar Wilde: The Centenary Exhibition** at the British Library  
10 November 2000 - 4 February 2001  
Contact: Greg Hayman 020 7412 7111

4. The Geffrye Museum presents the quintessential style of English urban middle class interiors from 1600 to the present day through a chronological sequence of period rooms. The museum is an independent charitable trust, grant-aided by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. The Trust actively seeks to attract donations and corporate sponsorship to support the museum's services and development plans.