

Thesis Proposal: Women and the Decorative Arts during the Aesthetic Movement:

The Interest in China Painting in America and in Akron, Ohio

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Women and Their Participation in the Aesthetic Movement and the Decorative Arts

Women, between the years 1880 and 1920, attempted to carve a niche for themselves in the art world. The Aesthetic Movement, which began in England in the 1860s, offered women a unique opportunity to be taken more seriously as artists, although usually in the realm of the so-called “minor arts. While men continued to dominate the fine arts, women began to take their traditional “feminine arts” to another level. Numerous objects at the forefront of the Aesthetic Movement were associated with the decorative arts, and were often considered household or domestic items. Because these items fit into the realm of domesticity, in control of women during this time period, it became acceptable for them to participate in the art associated with their domain.’

The Aesthetic Movement in America was characterized by a heightened interest in art and beauty in the late-nineteenth century. Although primarily associated with the decorative arts, this movement also included other elements such as fashion, painting, and writing. Beginning after the Civil War, this movement and its supporters promoted ideas that were the opposite of the ugliness that characterized such conflicts as war. Also, they rejected the mass-produced products of mid-nineteenth-century Victorian interiors and promoted the Aesthetic Movement’s ideas of hand-made, beautiful objects to adorn the home. Furthermore, the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition of 1876 served as a catalyst for the dissemination of these ideas. It was here, and at other subsequent exhibitions, where individuals, for the first time in large numbers, were able to view the latest trends in design from all over the world.² An interesting aspect of the Aesthetic Movement is that it

filtered into the lives of most average Americans. No longer reserved for the wealthy, interest in art achieved a “broad popular appeal” and a “large number of people engaged in the production of art’ Perhaps, most importantly, influential participants characterized the Aesthetic Movement, and the majority of them were women.

China painting was one of the most popular forms of expression for women during the Aesthetic Movement. This phenomenon, which began as a fashionable hobby for genteel women, became more common for middle-class women as the movement developed. China painting received most recognition in the big cities, but even in towns like Akron, Ohio, numerous women were involved in it. Using “blank” pieces of porcelain that had been imported from such places as Europe and Japan, women added the painted decoration to create their own one-of-a-kind pieces for domestic use, for gifts, and even for sale? Selling pieces of painted china offered an acceptable means of income for women during the time period.

China painting, for some women, was an amateur interest outside of their daily responsibilities. For others, however, it became a source of artistic satisfaction and some women became so proficient at china painting that they were able to generate an income from it. Frances E. Willard suggested in 1897 that hand-painted china of good quality could be a viable source of supplemental income at the Women’s Exchanges.⁶ With the help of industrial exchanges for so-called “women’s work” and art publications geared toward the average homemaker, such as *The Art Interchange* **and** *The Art Amateur*, women were inspired and encouraged to create art objects for their own use and, in some cases, even to sell for supplemental income?

High interest in the art of china painting necessitated a demand for teachers of the art. *The Art Amateur* and *The Art Interchange* contain numerous examples of advertisements describing

china-painting classes and listings of teachers offering courses in various cities. It is not surprising to learn that most of the teachers of china painting were women. Some of these women had their own studios and became fairly well known through advertising in several magazines

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I initially became interested in this study as I was doing a research project in a Material Culture Studies course. I documented a porcelain vase that had belonged to my grandmother. Searching through various sources, I found a collector's book on porcelain that listed a china-painting studio in Akron, Ohio. The author mentioned the Spicer Studio, owned by a woman between the years 1885 and 1910. Here, local Akron women learned to paint china under the direction of the owner or other instructors. If the pieces were exceptional, the women signed their own name near the Spicer Studio label, which was stamped on the bottom.⁹ I found it satisfying to know that china painting was more than a hobby for some of these women. They seemed to believe that their art serious was enough to sign pieces as any artist would. I decided to look into the general movement, led by the Aesthetes, with its focus on the traditionally feminine decorative arts. I hope to learn how some women, even locally, used their talents to their advantage, and what part these efforts played, if any, in gradually leading the way for women to be taken seriously in the art world.

Purpose

For this proposed study, I intend to first focus on the time period from 1880 to 1920. The Aesthetic Movement, which began in England in the 1860s, had significant influence in America from the last quarter of the nineteenth century into the first decades of the twentieth century. The Aesthetic Movement is intrinsically different from other movements prior to it because women

participated and played an important role in it. Although relatively short-lived, the Aesthetic Movement, with its emphasis on decorative arts, gave women a chance for artistic expression that was viewed as acceptable in the male-dominated art world.

I plan to use mostly primary sources for a general idea of the sentiment of American society at the turn of the century and the importance of women to this movement. There were several national magazines that were geared to the typical housewife and promoted participation in the arts and the Aesthetic Movement. These publications also gave information to women on where to find china-painting classes and materials, on how to sell their creations, and on patterns they could use in their own work. I plan to look at several sources including *The Art Amateur*, *The Art Interchange*, *The House Beautiful*, and *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* to see how this movement was espoused by and influenced by women.

Although in retrospect we tend to view women working in the china-painting medium as remaining within their appropriate realm, I hope to see if this effort **actually** helped them to step outside the usual boundaries. Did they use to the “feminine arts” to their **advantage**, to pave the way for future female artists in their struggle for equality in the male-dominated art world? It appears that some women earned a living by teaching china-painting classes to other women, some even in their own studios, taking this hobby to a new level and breaking out of the traditional

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limitations in a sense.

Finally, I plan to focus on Akron, Ohio, and how the Aesthetic Movement, decorative arts, and china painting specifically influenced local women. I will look at the local newspapers published during this time period, including the *Summit County Beacon*. I will look at these publications to search for articles, exhibitions, and information related to china painting locally.

I hope to find additional information on some women in this area who seemingly enjoyed considerable independence and autonomy over their lives by pursuing their artistic endeavors. For example, Lizzie Spicer, of Spicer Studio, remained in business throughout most of the time period studied and she was associated with other local china painters who were extremely talented at their craft.¹ I will be looking at census records that indicate professions of individuals and I will attempt to locate pieces from the Spicer Studio for comparison.

I believe that pursuing this study will be beneficial for several reasons. Hopefully it will offer some insight into women's influence and roles in the Aesthetic Movement in America. This is important because men dominated the art world during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. Perhaps this study will reveal ways that women participating in the "minor arts" began to break down traditional boundaries to the best of their abilities. Finally, I am pursuing the women china painters and instructors in Akron, Ohio, because they have not been written about in previous publications. I hope to give them credit for their endeavors and advanced ideas about women and the arts that have often been overlooked, thus contributing to the existing body of knowledge.

NOTES

1 Mary Warner Blanchard, *Oscar Wilde's America: Counterculture in the Gilded Age* (New Haven: Yale University, 1998), xv.

2 Ibid., *xii-xiii*.

3 Ibid., *xii*.

4 Sloan Van Patten, *The Collectors Encyclopedia of Nippon Porcelain* (Paducah, Ky: Collector Books, 1982), 49.

⁶Erances B. Willard, *Occupations for Women* (Cooper Union, NY: The Success Company, 1897), 442.

⁷Mrs. ML. Rayne, JThat *Can a Woman Do?* (Detroit, Chicago, Cincinnati, St. Louis: FE. Dickerson and Co., 1884), 149.

Examples in *The Art Amateur* (1880-1903) and *The Art Interchange* (1878-1892).
Van Patten, 49.

IC Ibid. "Census records for Summit County, Ohio, 1380—1920; City Directories Akron, Ohio, 1893-4894; Telephone Directory, Akron, OH, 1915; City Directory, Akron, 01-1, 1916,

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