

SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY

THE AURA OF 660 FIFTH AVENUE:
ALVA VANDERBILT, RICHARD MORRIS HUNT, AND THE EMERGENCE OF
AMERICAN LUXURY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF HUMANITIES PROGRAM IN
CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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DECEMBER 2019

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PREVIEW

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Dedication

For August and Tim

PREVIEW

Acknowledgments

Many generous people kindly helped me with my research and writing. My most sincere gratitude to my incredibly talented and helpful dissertation committee; Dr. Daniel Cowdin, Dr. Anthony Mangieri, and Dr. Timothy Demy. Without your support and guidance, this dissertation would not have been possible. Your collective insight, knowledge, and generosity are without bounds and deeply appreciated. I would also like to thank John Tschirch, former Director of Museum Affairs, Preservation Society of Newport County, and Paul F. Miller, Curator Emeritus, Preservation Society of Newport County (PSNC), whose incredibly specialized knowledge and enthusiasm for material culture in context was invaluable. A special thanks to Paul Miller for sharing his and life's work relating to Jules Allard and arranging unfettered access to the PSNC archives in support of my research. I would also like to thank: Linda Hunt, Librarian, Vedder Research Library, for her help accessing the Frederick H. DuBois papers; Elizabeth Terry Rose at the Library of Congress for her patience, enthusiasm and help navigating the Richard Morris Hunt archive; Catherine Taylor, Head Archivist, The Waddesdon Archive at Windmill Hill who confirmed Alva's visit to Waddestdon and solidified the connection between Alva and the Rothschilds; Paul Carnahan, Librarian at the Vermont Historical Society for help accessing the Hunt family papers, and Abigail M. Romanul Department Coordinator, Art of Europe, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston for access to the Allard Period Room files.

Abstract

This project introduces 660 Fifth Avenue as a total work of art and through a multidisciplinary framework, examines its aura, as it was originally completed and displayed to guests and members of the press at the time of the Vanderbilt Ball on March 26, 1883. Once completed, 660 Fifth Avenue was possessed as an act of performative identity by social celebrity, Alva Vanderbilt. Further, this project identifies Richard Morris Hunt as a cultural intermediary and arbiter of taste whose singular brand of academically studied, historically referential style, created a desire for a new mode of domestic architecture, which came to define American luxury. This project seeks to explore the potential of American Gilded Age domestic architecture to define taste, create desire, and shape a cultural zeitgeist

Chapter One

Introduction



Figure 1.1. Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt costumed for the Vanderbilt Ball, March 26, 1883.¹

¹ José Maria Mora, *Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt Costumed for the Vanderbilt Ball*, March 26, 1883, albumen print, Preservation Society of Newport County Archives and Special Collections, Newport, RI, accessed October 4, 2019, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=20467595>.

On the evening of March 26, 1883, Mr. and Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt welcomed over twelve-hundred guests to their new home for a fancy-dress ball given in honor of Mrs. Vanderbilt's childhood friend, Consuelo Yanzaga Montagu, then Viscountess Mandeville and later the Countess of Manchester (1853-1909). Although the ball reportedly cost over one million dollars and the New York City police department was engaged to restrain the throngs of spectators lining the streets, it could be argued that the real star of the night was the house itself. Designed by the French trained American architect, Richard Morris Hunt (1828-1895), 660 Fifth Avenue was the first Chateausque style residence in America. The interior finishes, museum quality fine and decorative arts collection installed within them was only surpassed the historically referential exterior. Hunt's patroness, the young Mrs. Alva Vanderbilt, keen to advance her position in Gilded Age society was the first New York hostess to allow the press unfettered access to both the months of preparation leading up to the Vanderbilt Ball and the ball itself. Thus, she ensured that on the morning of March 27, 1883, the international press was brimming with spectacular accounts of the ball given the previous evening by the newly crowned queen of New York society, Alva Vanderbilt. Within a decade, dozens of similar historically referential homes populated the newly tony midtown streets of New York.

Fifty-two years later, German philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) wrote, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," an essay which would forever change the landscape of aesthetic philosophy.² In this seminal essay, Benjamin turns his critical eye to the power of the innate and somewhat ethereal qualities of a work of art, or its *aura*.

² Walter Benjamin, "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt, and Leon Wieseltier (New York: Schocken Books, 2013), 220-24.

Benjamin defines aura as, “The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced.”³ To further codify his meaning, Benjamin notes that the essence of aura is a composite of the following elements: presence in time and space, authenticity, tradition, ritual, and cult of exhibition. Benjamin’s theory, like traditional art historical methodology relating to both fine and decorative art, focuses on individual objects within a particular cultural framework to extrapolate meaning.

This project introduces 660 Fifth Avenue as a total work of art and examines its potential for social and cultural change through a carefully constructed theoretical framework utilizing theories of material culture, identity, and taste to further illuminate the abstract notion of aura as communicated by Walter Benjamin. Through this lens, the potential for social transformation through art may be explored. Using Walter Benjamin’s concept of aura as communicated in his 1935 essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” as a starting point, this dissertation will examine 660 Fifth Avenue as more than a revolutionary architectural form but as a medium through which complex cultural information can be understood. Once completed, 660 Fifth was possessed as an act of performative identity by social celebrity, Alva Vanderbilt. Further, this project identifies Richard Morris Hunt as an arbiter of taste whose singular brand of academically studied, historically referential style created a desire for a new mode of domestic architecture, which engendered a new brand of social behavior that came to define American luxury.

³ Benjamin, “Work,” 221.

Need

Although the ethereal and magical properties ascribed by Benjamin to the auratic idols used in religious ceremonies may seem at odds with a domestic residence, the experience of 660 Fifth Avenue, by members of the Vanderbilt's social circle, members of the press, and members of the wider public, was in fact, akin to the mystic properties ascribed by Benjamin to individual artworks.⁴ As such, the collection, its display, and subsequent syndicated publication, elevated the resonant modern aura of both the collection itself and its owners.

This topic relates to numerous curatorial and research fields and is engaged with recent scholarship in media, architecture, material culture, design, and celebrity. The American Gilded Age has captivated scholars in many fields, yet little has been written within an academic framework relating theories of identity and material culture with the emergence of American Gilded Age architectural forms and expansion of American Gilded Age social rituals. Often derided as vapid expressions of one-upsmanship, American Gilded Age residential architecture, and certainly 660 Fifth Avenue deserve a place in long and rich scholarly tradition, which explores of architecture, furnishings, and material culture as both an outlet for personal identity and source of rich cultural information.⁵ Gilded Age interiors

⁴ Benjamin, "Work," 225. Benjamin discusses the power of an Elk portrayed by a Stone Age artist, which although revealed to man on occasion, functioned as an "instrument of magic" and was created for the Gods.

⁵ Daniel Miller, *Anthropology of the Individual: A Material Culture Perspective* (New York, Berg, 2009). This collection of essays edited by Daniel Miller explores the use of material culture to define social position within a class, group, or tribe. Most significant to this project is, Millers essay, "Individuals and the Aesthetic of Order," in which he describes the meaning tattooing has for a young Londoner called Charlotte. Because Charlotte's mother introduced her to tattooing and piercing, Charlotte has linked these tattooing events to memory and her mother. Hence, she gets tattoos only to commemorate important events in her life and destroys or covers tattoos of people and times she no longer wishes to keep. She memorializes these tattoos and experiences in photographs which she keeps in a memento box. In this way, even though she is engaging in similar behavior to thousands of other young girls, Charlotte's tattoos are related to her personal, and individual memories and function as a type of family history. "She has a systematic cosmology of memory and objectification." (10).

represent a combination of acquired and original pieces, which embody complex relationships and meanings for both the collector - patron and the visitor - observer. Too often, however, emphasis is placed on the astronomical prices paid for the furnishings and decorations of Gilded Age interiors, leaving more substantial scholarship of the objects themselves and their Gilded Age utility dismissed as derivative or plundered spoils of the elite.

Walter Benjamin's "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," has been the subject of myriad scholarly publications, a significant number of which focus on the reproduced image as a political or commercial tool or the reflexive nature of the cinematically or digitally produced environment on a visually oriented society.⁶ Yet absent the power of aura, it would be impossible to use an image, in its original iteration or subsequent reproductions, to evince social or political change in any way. Unlike painting, Benjamin observes the reception of architecture is experienced in two ways, "Use and {by} perception - or touch and sight."⁷ This small distinction illuminates the auratic potential in architecture. This project, through lens of Walter Benjamin's aura, seeks to address questions about the role American Gilded Age domestic architecture can play in defining taste, creating desire, and shaping a cultural zeitgeist. The original scholarly contribution would then be

⁶ For examples of this kind of scholarship see, Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). Eric Jaconson, *Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). James R. Martel, *Textual Conspiracies: Walter Benjamin, Idolatry, and Political Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011). Catherine Russell, "New Media and Film History: Walter Benjamin and the Awakening of Cinema." *Cinema Journal* 43, no. 3 (2004): 81-85. doi:10.1353/cj.2004.0024, Catherine Russell, *Archaeology: Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices. A Camera Obscura Book* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018). Marcus Bullock, "The Rose of Babylon: Walter Benjamin, Film Theory, and the Technology of Memory." *MLN* 103, no. 5 (1988): 1098-120. Doi: 10.2307/2905202. Paul A. Taylor and Jan L. Harris, *Critical Theories of Mass Media: Then and Now* (Maidenhead, Berkshire, England: McGraw Hill/Open University Press, 2008).

⁷ Benjamin, "Work," 240.

twofold: Firstly the construction of a multi-disciplinary theoretical framework to explore Benjamin's theories relating to Aura to an American Gilded Age domestic architecture and interior, and secondly indications that this modern iteration of aura in the age of mechanical reproduction has far reaching implications in fields like media studies, sociology, interior design, architecture, material culture and museum studies.

Rationale

This dissertation focuses on the architecture and interior finishes of 660 Fifth Avenue as it was originally completed and subsequently displayed to guests and members of the press at the time of the Vanderbilt Ball on March 26th, 1883. As a total work of art, 660 Fifth Avenue functions as a personal possession, and its display an act of performative identity.⁸ 660 Fifth can then be used as a case study to explore the relationship of Walter Benjamin's concept of aura to domestic architecture considered a total work of art, furthering the academic dialogue regarding the use of architecture and interior as a modality of self-fashioning and instrument for human change.

It is appropriate to consider 660 Fifth Avenue as a total work of art for several reasons. The term "Total Work of Art" was introduced to the modern vernacular by German opera composer Richard Wagner (1813-1883).⁹ In two critical 1849 essays, "Art and Revolution" and "The Artwork of the Future," Wagner used the term, 'Gesamtkunstwerk,' to demonstrate the ideal nature of the Greek tragedies of Aeschylus which he viewed as a

⁸ Theories of performative identity were pioneered by Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), and are discussed later in this chapter.

⁹ Richard Wagner, "Art and Revolution," trans. William Ashton Ellis, Public-Library.Uk, Last modified 2019, <http://www.public-library.uk/ebooks/11/97.pdf>.

total artistic synthesis, in which word, music and dance existed in perfect harmony.¹⁰ The term was later applied to architecture, including residential architecture, during the Art Nouveau period (1880s-1910s). Architects during this period like Victor Horta, Hector Guimard, and Antonio Gaudi attempted to create a new contemporary language of design in which buildings and artworks were not tied to the past. In doing so, these architects, and others like them, designed not only the architectural shell, but the interior finishes, furniture, accessories and even the landscape.¹¹ Sadly few residential examples of Art Nouveau buildings which could be considered total works of art remain in their original conditions, but undisturbed examples do exist from later periods.

Such scholarly consideration gains traction during the modernist movement. Houses like the 1929 Rietveld Schröder House (fig 1.2) designed by Gerrit Rietveld (1888-1964) are revered as modernist masterpieces and, by some as a site-specific works of art.

The design of the Rietveld Schröder House is rooted in Rietveld's involvement with the De Stijl art movement (1917-1931), whose main principles focus on a universal design through balance of opposites expressed in the use of opposing primary colors and vertical and horizontal linear elements.¹² These hallmarks of De Stijl theory are expressed in the Rietveld Schröder House through the lack of traditional exterior ornament or grand entry, placing the focus instead on opposing elements of color and lines moving through space, exemplified by the open corner at the second floor window (fig 1.3).

The same theory behind the architectural envelope of the Rietveld Schröder House is further expressed in the interior, where fixed lines dissolve within a carefully choreographed

¹⁰ Wagner, "Art and Revolution."

¹¹ Buie Harwood, Bridget May, and Curt Sherman, *Architecture and Interior Design* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2012), 559-76.

¹² Harwood, 615-9.

dance of moving walls and thoughtfully planned primary color scheme, which delineates interior spatial order without the use of traditional fixed walls (fig. 1.4).

In addition, Rietveld designed all of the furniture inside the house including many built-in's and the famous 1923, Red and Blue Chair (fig 1.5). Like the architectural envelope, and the scheme of the interior finishes, the design for the Red and Blue Chair manipulates rectilinear volumes creating an interaction of vertical and horizontal planes delineated by a simple black frame complimented by a red back and blue seat. Where Rietveld's great insight is expressed is in the yellow terminus of supporting elements of the chair, which demonstrate that the lines go through space, and none of the separate elements, ie. back, seat, arms, and legs, are joined with fixed corners. In its original installation against a black wall, the supporting framework of the Blue and Red chair seemed to dissolve, and the chair resembled a work of art rather than a piece of furniture. This new way of thinking about the design of a house or a chair as an object in space, rather than a set of fixed planes was revolutionary. Everything in the Rietveld Schröder House is contemporary with its construction, was conceived in concert by Rietveld, and expresses the principles of the De Stijl movement. The experience of one element of design is not complete absent the others. As such, it is a prime example of a work of architecture, which can also be considered a total work of art.

The architectural envelope of 660 Fifth Avenue seems to differ from the strict governing principles of modernist architectural movements like De Stijl, yet its form is derived from similarly rigid architectural theory, and it appeared just as strikingly modern to New Yorkers in 1882. Commonly referred to as Academic Eclecticism, this stylistic definition refers to a broad rejection of the irregularity of loosely borrowed revival styles favored in the Victorian Era. Architects like Hunt were critical of the overabundance of

dissonant ornament engendered by easily accessible goods popularized by manufacturers in the industrial era, which had no basis in design theory, and lacked the studied modularity of form favored in classical traditions.

Classical Eclecticism, is rooted in classical tradition favoring academically treated interpretations of historically referential styles within a unified appearance. Like the unified architectural principles of De Stijl, and more seemingly cohesive architectural forms, the exterior of 660 Fifth Avenue was the product of Hunt's rigorous academic training at the prestigious L'Ecole des Beaux Arts (fig. 1.6).¹³

The main principles of Academic Eclecticism, evident in the facade of 660 Fifth Avenue are expressed through a synthesis of classical historic form and ornament on a monumental scale. The articulated elements of the facade follow a distinct hierarchy in service of a harmonious whole derived from a relation of strictly governed segments.

Although the interior represents a variety of historically referential styles, amid a mix of new and provenanced pieces, the effect was conceived in its totality by Richard Morris Hunt. Archival drawings in Hunt's hand delineate not just the exterior architectural form and ornament, but also the interior floor plans and finishes. The original drawing for the Main Hall, staircase with cupola, the Parlor, Dining, Moorish Room, and Library, were completed in Hunt's office.¹⁴ Many of these original sketches contain notes and pencil sketches

¹³ Paul Baker, *Richard Morris Hunt* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1980), 28-29. Cardinal Mazarin founded the L'Ecole des Beaux Arts, originally the Academy of Fine Arts, in 1648 in service of Louis XIV as an expression of French royal taste and power. It was the first royal sponsored academy offering instruction in drawing, painting, sculpture, architecture, and other media including decorative arts. Later called The L'Ecole des Beaux Arts, the school is world renowned for rigorous academic coursework and the highest standards of education and academic achievement.

¹⁴ John Vredenburg Van Pelt, ed. Eugene Clute, *A Monograph of the William K Vanderbilt House: Richard Morris Hunt, Architect* (New York: John Vredenburg Van Pelt, 1925), 15.

indicating changes. One interior sketch (fig. 1.7) depicts a richly paneled room centered on a monumental fireplace.

Hunt's detailed drawing of the interior finishes of the room also offers a suggested layout for the placement of books and objects in and above the bookshelf as well as upon the richly figural over mantel.

Hunt employed a variety of artisans to execute his vision for 660 Fifth Avenue. Just as Rietveld did not actually execute the interior finishes or build the furniture for the Schröder House, rather he conceived of their design and placement within the spatial envelope he created. In the execution of 660 Fifth Avenue, Hunt did the same. A master conductor, his keen oversight and first-hand knowledge made him the only architect in America capable of creating this, house at this time.

Although the interior collection at 660 Fifth Avenue seems familiar, it also represents something new, which was only beginning to emerge in American Gilded Age society; the instant collection. The collection of interior furnishings and art housed at 660 Fifth Avenue were only assembled for the purpose of adorning that specific residence. As such, 660 Fifth is different from other kind of collections and collecting which have attracted scholarly attention and can be separated from their architectural envelope and still hold the same meaning.

The first kind of collection is the family collection, often amassed over many generations residing in the same home. The common thread binding these artifacts is their connection to that same family and its socio-economic and cultural activity over a period of time. One such example is the museum and collection now on view to the public at Blenheim Palace, Woodstock in Oxfordshire, UK. The one time home of Alva and William K.

Vanderbilt's eldest child, Consuelo Vanderbilt Balsan (1877-1964), the museum houses over 300 years of art and artifacts relating to the Spencer-Churchill family and those who worked for them in one of Great Britain's most important palaces.¹⁵ Present day visitors can tour the palace for a variety of experiences including; tour of the interior formal state rooms and private apartments of the Marlborough family, the 'Downstairs Tour' which offers a look at the life of Blenheim Palace staff, a garden tour replete with a maze, a Churchill history tour and a renovations tour detailing efforts at site renovation and preservation.

The second kind of collection which has been considered in the academic tradition is an enthusiast's personal collection. Although visitors may experience Blenheim and much of its rich tradition, not everything remains. Scholars at Oxford are turning their attention to the collection of 800 pieces of jewelry amassed by the Fourth Duke of Marlborough (1739-1817) and subsequently put up for sale by his heirs in 1899.¹⁶ An avid collector with varied interests, the Fourth Duke's prized Neo-Classical works but is best known for his acquisition of the collections of other noted figures including the Renaissance collection of the Gonzaga Dukes of Mantua, and the 18th century collection of Lord Bessborough.¹⁷ Although now dispersed, scholars at Oxford have amassed a digital archive of materials related to the pieces in the collection, both while they were owned by the Fourth Duke of Marlborough, and at other times in history. The relevance and scholarly interest in this collection derives as much from the beauty and form of its individual pieces as it does from its association with this collection. Inclusion in the Marlborough collection confers an ontology of excellence and

¹⁵ "Visit Us," Visit Us, Blenheim Palace, Last modified 2019, <https://www.blenheimpalace.com/visitus/>.

¹⁶ "The Marlborough Collection," Gem Research, Classical Art Research Center, University of Oxford, UK, Last modified 2019, <https://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/gems/marlborough/default.htm>.

¹⁷ "Oxford, "Marlborough Collection."

superiority to any piece associated with it. This auratic element is not diminished by its subsequent dispersal, as its provenance endures.

Neither Alva nor William K. Vanderbilt could be considered collectors. In fact, once their many residences were completed and furnished by Hunt and his cadre of collaborators, the interiors were not altered nor were the collections significantly added to.¹⁸ Secondly as primary and secondary sources demonstrate, neither Alva nor William K. Vanderbilt were particularly interested in works of art or artifacts from any specific time period, or in amassing any specific type of collection. Similarly, they were not personally involved in regard to authenticity or provenance relating to the objects they acquired.

To determine suitability for acquisition, they instead relied on the expertise of the most well regarded cultural intermediaries like Richard Morris Hunt.¹⁹ Thus, 660 Fifth, and its corresponding interior finishes and design are entirely a creation of Richard Morris Hunt, and as such should be treated as a total work of art.

Using Benjamin's theory as a critical lens to examine 660 Fifth Avenue as a total work of art offers insight as to how and why it had such a powerful, almost mythic, effect on Gilded Age society. Once regarded as a total work of art, possession becomes possible and

¹⁸ "Inventories," Marble House Archive, Preservation Society of Newport County, Newport, RI. When Marble House, the Newport residence of Alva and William K. Vanderbilt, was sold to Frederick H. Prince in 1932, the inventory indicates that the contents of the house were largely original to its 1892 debut.

¹⁹ Hunt in turn relied on a number of craftsmen and dealers of repute including famed English art and antiques dealer Sir. Joseph Duveen (1869-1939) through whom most of the significant paintings for 660 Fifth Avenue were acquired. See, "How Duveen Made European Art Part of American Culture," Lévy Gorvy, Last modified 2019, <https://www.levygorvy.com/happenings/how-duveen-made-european-art-part-of-american-culture/>. Duveen partnered with noted American art historian and Renaissance art expert Bernard Berenson (1865-1959), whose credentials lent credibility to Duveen and his wares. Other Gilded Age figures were cheated by so-called expert dealers, notably, Peter Arrell Brown. For example, P.A.B Widener purchases a substantial number of works from Dutch art dealer Leo Nardus which were later proved to be worth less than 5% of what Widener paid. See Jonathan Lopez, "Gross False Pretenses," Lopez, Jonathan. "'Gross False Pretences': the Misdeeds of Art dealer Leo Nardus." *Apollo*, December 2007, 76+. Gale Academic Onefile (accessed September 24, 2019).

https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A172685388/AONE?u=mlln_s_umass&sid=AONE&xid=8d6c359a.

the aura of 660 Fifth Avenue, is expressed through a cult of personality and celebrity, rather than tradition and in that shift modern meaning is made.

Identity and Self Fashioning

Sociologist Erving Goffman (1922-1982) published the masterfully insightful *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* in 1956.²⁰ Goffman observed the interaction of regular people in everyday life and theorized that the persona displayed in everyday face-to-face interactions is similar to the persona in theatrically produced roles. When meeting another, the individual attempts to control the impression by altering his or her setting, appearance and behavior to be received in the best possible light. Simultaneously, the person on the other side of the interaction is trying to gather information about the performative individual. Individuals then, play a range of different parts determined by the situation and the people they encounter, and as such adapt who they are based on the reception of the projected self. These encounters are both the structure and structuring elements of an individual or group's reality, ie. what we think of ourselves and how we think we are regarded by others. Thus, Goffman theorizes there is no true self behind the identifiable player we project except the individual as author of presentation in everyday life.

As such, the wealth of primary and secondary source material related to 660 Fifth Avenue, its reception by the public and members of Gilded Age society, the Vanderbilt family, and Richard Morris Hunt are a primary focus of this project.

The fascination with Alva Vanderbilt began during her own lifetime as decades of newspaper commentary reveal both her immediate thoughts and those of the American

²⁰ Goffman, 1-77.