"My Firelight Dream, I Thus Record It":
Creating Female Artists in Oscar Wilde's *The Woman's World*

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In 1888, *The Woman's World* published triolets by Edythe H. Cross, which depicts a comic miscommunication between a male Aesthetic poet, lulled into a reverie by a tableau of woman, fire and Japanese fan, and a woman whose thoughts are those of a materialistic consumer: "*He*" first goes, "Eyes that are watching the fire/ Over the Japanese fan,/ What do you see in the pyre?/ . . . / Say, do the embers inspire/ Fancies too dainty for man,/ . . . ?" In response to this, "*She*" answers, "Sir Poet, if you needs must know/ My firelight dream, I thus record it:/ I thought while gazing at the glow,/ . . . / 'That bonnet that becomes me so,/ I wonder if I can afford it'" (Cross 1: 265). This poem encapsulates the tension between fine and decorative arts: the latter, which included house decoration and dress, was often associated with consumer culture and femininity in the Victorian period, and here there is a sense that the indifference of the woman is a way of taking revenge on her male Aesthete companion for attempting to construct a fantasy around her.

In the last couple of decades, *The Woman's World*, a magazine edited by Oscar Wilde from 1887 to 1889, has been praised as a socially reforming magazine which elevated the status of women.[1] Catharine Ksinan, for example, praises Wilde for his celebration of women's "intellectual and artistic contribution to the culture" (424). The magazine has also been discussed in relation to Aestheticism. Talia

Schaffer argues that *The Woman's World* relocates Aestheticism within a "feminised realm" and shows Aestheticism as something "popular, based in material culture" (2), whilst Loretta Ann Clayton, in her *Fashionably Wilde*, observes that Aestheticism played an important part in this magazine to construct a new type of female readers. Diana Maltz, on the other hand, insists the magazine is composed around a schism in Aestheticism between Ruskinian philanthropy, and Paterian decadence Aestheticism.

In this paper, I will seek to develop these arguments further, by focusing on discussions of decorative and fine arts within the magazine. Although recent critics have acknowledged the tension between fashion and high art in *The Woman's World*, they do not analyse the content of the magazine in detail regarding this tension. The tension between fine and decorative arts had a long history in the Victorian period and thus should not be underestimated. From the 1830s, the government started to establish schools and museums to improve designs in Britain: among them was the South Kensington Museum, opened in 1857. The museum accommodated decorative arts shown in the Great Exhibition (1851) and its purpose was to educate the public and make British manufactures more competitive in relation to imported goods.[2] John Ruskin, however, was against this trend as it was commercially oriented and attempted to offer design principles; instead, Ruskin promoted creative craftsmanship in architecture and decorative arts through studies of nature, an idea which greatly influenced the Aesthetic Movement and Arts and Crafts movement.[3]

Ruskin is important as he evaluated decorative arts as "art": "Get rid, then, at once of any idea of Decorative art being a degraded or a separate kind of art" (320). In the 1870s, decorative arts, especially in the form of house decoration and furniture, that is, "art" in daily life, became a great concern for middle-class consumers through house decoration manual books and shops like Liberty's, where Eastern goods

were sold.[4] Then in the 1890s, Aesthetic journals like *The Studio* dealt with "the fine and applied arts on an equal footing as two sides of the same coin" (Snodin 93). On the other hand, James McNeill Whistler took a stand against the house decoration craze, calling the advisors "false prophets" and censuring them for having "brought the very name of the beautiful into disrepute" (136). Thus, when we focus on decorative arts, we can see that an inherent tension opens up between fine and decorative arts.

Aestheticism, thus, may be regarded as a process by which decorative arts sought to move closer to the realm of fine art, especially in the 1870s and 1880s. It is noteworthy that Eastern or Oriental decorative arts were heavily involved in that process. Around that time, *Japonisme* constituted an important part of Aestheticism. Elizabeth Aslin even declares that "[i]n the 'seventies . . . Japanism and the Aesthetic Movement were virtually synonymous" (79). The image of Japanese decorative arts, which was more like a conflated image of "the East," was praised both by "elite" and "popular" Aesthetes, for such arts/products were hand-made, original (in colour and design), and inexpensive.[5] Japanese decorative arts first attracted William Michael Rossetti, a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, James McNeill Whistler, as well as Gothic Revivalists such as William Burges and Edward William Godwin, both architects and designers (Lambourne, *Japonisme* 88-91). However, when Godwin describes the customers at the Liberty's in 1876, it was "bevy of ladies" who crowded the shop rather than prominent people like architects and painters (266).

Thus, the Eastern decorative arts throw into relief the tension between elite and popular art, as well as embodying broader issues of gender politics.[6] Indeed, when we see *The Woman's World*, it can be said that some elite Aesthetes started to separate themselves off from popular Aestheticism, which was strongly connected to consumer culture and femininity. Female elite Aesthetes show an especially

strong hostility towards the customary association between Oriental images and femininity. As the poem by Cross at the beginning clearly shows, the gaze of male Aesthetes, Eastern art, femininity and consumer culture are inextricably tied up together; Cross, an elite female Aesthete, ironically depicts the association between Eastern art and femininity, as well as women's obsession with fashion. The attitude displayed towards Eastern decorative arts and fashion (and decorative arts and fashion in general) could thus exemplify the tension between elite and popular Aestheticism as well as that between women and men.

Popular and Elite Aestheticism

Aestheticism was a complex movement: it was started by male elite intellectuals such as John Ruskin and their teachings were later disseminated into consumer culture.[7] It was through shops and manual books that middle-class consumers became conscious of "art" in daily life. In this paper, the term "popular" articles refers to those that are associated more with consumer culture; that is, decorative arts (especially fashion items, house decoration and furnishings) and dress whereas "elite" articles are concerned with literature or fine art. This distinction is also based on an important letter of Oscar Wilde. In April 1887, when he consented to join the editorial team of *The Lady's World*,[8] the precursor to *The Woman's World*, Wilde wrote to Wemyss Reid (general manager of Cassell's publishing) that as "the field of mere millinery and trimmings" is already discussed in the *Queen* and the *Lady's Pictorial*, he will "deal not merely with what women wear, but with what they think, and what they feel" ("To Wemyss" 297). In the same letter, Wilde continues that the articles on dress should be located at "the end of the magazine," while "literature, art, travel, and social studies" should be placed at the beginning (298). Thus, I will separate my analysis into two parts: the East and decorative arts and dress in popular articles and in elite articles, following Wilde's

division—that is, between two categories of Aestheticism. I should also note that this paper will specifically focus on Wilde's articles such as "Literary and Other Notes" and serial articles on fashion by Mrs Johnston and Violette, which appeared at "the end of the magazine" at least during the first year of publication, because they should exemplify the Wilde's distinction of elite and popular articles.[9]

The East in Popular Articles

I will now focus on how the articles in *The Woman's World* deal with decorative arts and fashion, compared to fine art. Popular articles seem to emphasise the fantasy aspect of Eastern decorative arts; however, they also employ it to highlight the importance of female self-expression through embellishing their houses with decorative arts and through dress.

In *The Woman's World*, the fashion articles, a typical example of popular articles, comprise two parts: monthly coverage in London, and reports from Paris. At first, both cities' fashions were covered in one article, with Mrs Johnstone as the author of the London part and Violette responsible for the Paris part. However, from January 1889 they were dealt with in separate articles. The image of the East we find here is associated with fairy-tales and with femininity. Mrs. Johnstone and Violette, for example, associate Eastern or Oriental arts with a more fantasised image. When Violette discusses a ball held in a "Buddha gallery," in M. Cernuschi's place in Paris, which she calls "a museum of Eastern art" ("July Fashions" 1: 431), she mixes up the Eastern countries by saying, "The great painter [Carolus Duran] himself was present, as an Indian chief; his daughter appeared as a dainty Japanese lady" in "the great Japanese gallery" with "the colossal bronze statue of the Buddha meditating" ("July Fashions" 1: 431). The rather confused image of Eastern decorative arts in these fashion articles is, indeed, shrouded in a flowery, unrealistic atmosphere, "copied from pictures"

(1: 431). In the "headpiece" of "Paris Fashions" (Fig. 1), for example, small Japanese ladies are juxtaposed with flowers, which are the same size as them; and one of them is opening a treasure box filled with jewels. The illustration emphasises the fairy-tale image of the Japanese (Eastern) female figure. Mrs. Johnstone's "The Latest Fashions" also highlights this image. The "headpiece," again, shows Japanese ladies who hold umbrellas, loosely connected to cherubim with ribbons, who also hold umbrellas (Fig. 2). Thus, the Eastern decorative arts (or possibly women) in popular articles in the magazine, especially its illustrations, look to engage more of a stylistic interest than a theoretical one.

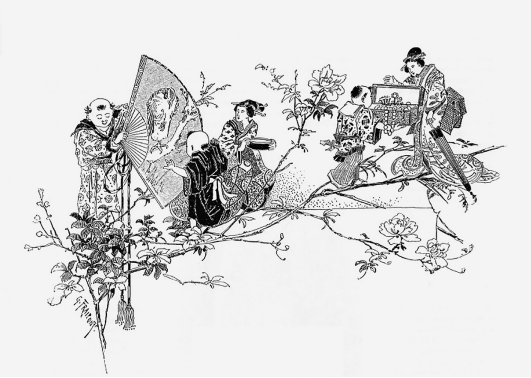

Fig. 1. Fraipont, G. "Headpiece" of "Paris Fashions." May 1889. *The Woman's World*. Ed. Oscar Wilde. Vol. 2. (London: Cassell, 1889; Tokyo: Athena Press, 2007; print; 359).

Fig. 2. "Headpiece" of "The Latest Fashions." Sept. 1889. *The Woman's World*. Ed. Oscar Wilde. Vol. 2. (London: Cassell, 1889; Tokyo: Athena Press, 2007; print; 580).

In addition to this fantasised image, these articles have features in common with contemporary images of Eastern decorative arts; that is, they are inexpensive and hand-made: Mrs. Johnstone praises Oriental decorative arts for house decoration items as they "certainly introduce an element of beauty" and "none are costly" (2: 637) in "The Latest Fashions" of October 1889. Some other popular articles in *The Woman's World* also see Eastern decorative arts as an ideal example of hand-made objects.[10]

Most importantly, there are some articles that use Eastern decorative arts as an example of women as creative or independent agents. Gleeson White, founder of the periodical *The Studio*, assumes Japanese Kakémono (paper-hanging) to be a feminine art: "from the Kakémono itself there are, maybe, other variants derivable, which lend themselves more readily to amateur decoration, and employ the specially feminine art of the needle to complete their adornment" (2: 614). Eastern decorative arts, in the article, seemingly require female hands of readers to be arranged and the article advises its female readers that Kakémono-inspired picture frames can add pleasant effects to their houses at low cost (2: 616). Thus, Eastern decorative arts come to serve as examples of female creativity to produce beautiful things or of their independence to put their own tastes into practice, and this tendency is not confined to "Eastern" decorative arts; it is also recognisable in articles on decorative arts and dress in general.

For example, Mrs. Johnstone insists that "[d]ress is now a fine art, on which artists and artificers do not disdain to expend all their talents, all their experience, and all their research" ("December Fashions" 2: 74) and maintains that women should act on their own discretion, not to be deluded by the marketplace (74-75). Violette also argues that "[e]mbroidery, at its best, is a fine art; it is the fine art of women" ("October Fashions" 1: 570).[11] Indeed, throughout the magazine, we can find that Mrs. Johnstone and Violette claim that dressmaking and

embroidery are arts for women. It is noteworthy that this definition of "art" can be seen in contemporary house decoration or dress manual books too: Mrs Mary Eliza Haweis, one of these manual book writers, clearly declares that "a dress now claims to be considered as a work of art" (*Beauty* 12),[12] for example. By merging the domestic market with fine art, the female contributors of popular articles actually attempt to challenge the teachings of male elite Aesthetes. Mrs. Johnston, in "March Fashions," for example, takes issue with Ruskin: "there is no reason why, acting on Ruskin's oft-repeated advice, women should not do this work [ornamenting their own dress] themselves, or, at all events, give out the work to be done by gentlewomen less favoured by fortune" (1: 234-35). Although there is a class issue we may note here, Mrs. Johnston declares that women are now free to decorate their own dress, explicitly opposing "Ruskin's oft-repeated advice" (1: 234-35). Here, the female wearers' (or consumers') creativity also starts to be discussed, as well as that of the female dressmakers or lace-makers.

This is quite important, because now it is the female wearer, not the elite male Aesthetes or dressmakers, who controls her own appearance. Not only dressmakers but also wearers are considered as potential "artists." It was Daniel Miller (1987) who acknowledged "the birth of the consumer," with the consumer cast as a creative agent (175-77): what needs to be emphasised is that decorative arts can provide an alternative language for women to express their *individuality* or their decisions or tastes in the popular articles in *The Woman's World*. Mrs. Johnstone herself argues for the importance of knowing how to present oneself when choosing dress: "a well-dressed woman," she writes, should have "a knowledge of materials, of form, of colour, and, above all, of what suits her own individuality" ("July Fashions" 1: 425) and she repeatedly insists that dress shows the wearer's individuality in later articles.[13]

To put emphasis on individuality was, indeed, a trend of the times,

especially in the field of decoration and fashion manual books. As Deborah Cohen suggests, in the late Victorian period, there was an obsession for women to express their "individuality" through their possessions, including decorative arts in houses and dress (125-36). One of the most prominent advocates was Mrs Mary Eliza Haweis. She published manuals on house decoration and dress such as *The Art of Beauty* (1878), *The Art of Dress* (1879) and *The Art of Decoration* (1881). Mrs Haweis, for example, regards dress and furnishings as "art," when she discusses women's dress, claiming, "We shall never have any school of art in England, either in dress or decoration of any kind, until the fundamental principle of good art is recognised, that *people may do as they like* in the matter" (*Beauty* 15) and she continues, "[T]here can be no originality of scheme until individual taste is admitted to be free" (*Beauty* 15). Thus, Mrs Haweis, counted female wearers as artists when they can free their individuality or individual tastes through dress.

Thus, although Eastern decorative arts look to be primarily a matter of style in popular articles in *The Woman's World*, they also highlight the function of decorative arts as "art" or as a means of women's self-expression, which was not an exclusive feature to this magazine. Decorative arts and fashion were now increasingly connected to consumers' obsession with individuality. However, some people like Whistler were reluctant to accept this new definition of "art"[14] and this magazine introduced an article that shows the limitation of such art. Another popular article writer, A. E. F. Eliot-James, for example, warned female consumers against being deluded by the false commercial prospectuses. In "Shopping in London" (1888), Eliot-James depicts certain types of shoppers in London from a comical angle. One type is that of the female consumer who wears Liberty's from top to toe. Eliot-James asks the readers to "[n]ote this lady robed in "Liberty silk" of sad-coloured green, with rather more than a suspicion of yellow in ribbons, sash, and hat (suggestive of a

badly-made salad), who talks learnedly to her young friend" of tone and colours (2: 6). Although Eliot-James says that "Liberty's is the chosen resort of the artistic shopper" and the lady shows "the artistic yearnings of her soul," Eliot-James cynically explains that it is easy to imagine what the lady's drawing-room is like, implying that her style is too typical as a Liberty's goer (2: 6). She continues that when one notices that the fashionable Liberty's colour, which was inspired by Eastern fabrics originally imported from Japan, Persia, China and India but later dyed in England (Aslin 82; Adburgham 24-26), "would best suit her colouring and individuality, we mentally pull ourselves together, becoming conscious that we are staring somewhat fixedly at the Artistic One" (Eliot-James 2: 6). Liberty's was a popular shop in London that sold Eastern goods and Eastern-inspired dress, and played an important role in Aestheticism;[15] Eliot-James here refers to the possibility that the lady's style might not meet one's "individuality," although this was supposedly the great selling point of Liberty's. Thus, in the magazine, Eastern decorative arts become a symbol of the paradoxical rhetoric of the market, which promises that products will free wearers' individuality or show their tastes, but consumers end up wearing the same clothes as everyone else. Still, even in that case, it shows how the demands of the marketplace have become strongly obsessed with expressing individuality.

Thus, we can see that like contemporary manual books, the popular articles in the magazine try to find their own position in decorative arts in the house and dress for the sake of expressing female customers' tastes or individuality independently in the marketplace. At the same time, however, *The Woman's World* contains an article that shows the limitation of such creativity.

The East in Elite Articles

By the term "elite articles," I mean those concerned with "literature,

art, travel, and social studies" (Wilde, "To Wemyss" 298). This section will show that the image of the East in such elite texts is as fantasised and feminine as that found in the popular articles. However, it differs in the following two points: firstly, the concept of "the East" is associated with a pre-modern image. Secondly, although some writers relate it to female freedom, they emphasise its external beauty. These seemingly different approaches, I would argue, appear to show similar aspirations as those apparent within the popular articles; that is, aspirations to redefine women as independent or creative agents instead of as objectified figures.

In the context of Aestheticism, Eastern Art, especially Japanese, Chinese and Indian art, was thought of as the product of mediaeval and pre-modern countries. Gothic Revivalists were precisely attracted by this seemingly mediaeval state.[16] In "Woman in Oriental Poetry and Literature," an elite article in *The Woman's World*, Florence Layard inherited this confusion, and Eastern art is associated with a pre-modern ambiance. Unlike Gothic Revivalists, Layard casts a stern eye to the East: she critically highlights this pre-modern image of the East and states that all Oriental women are still despised by men to some extent; and further insists that without Christianity and civilisation, the situation will never change (2: 211).

Still, some elite article writers believe that Eastern art—even fine arts—should be appreciated. Mary Reed, in her article "A Chat about Japanese Dress,"[17] insists that Japanese female writers have power in society although there are limitations: "whatever its limitations, it remains none the less a remarkable and noteworthy fact that the genius of the woman equalled that of the man in this intellectual groove" (2: 560). What is noteworthy here is that as its limitation, Reed states that Japanese literature does not have "profundity or philosophic wisdom" (2: 560) but for her, it is more important that female artists are actively involved in the front lines of the art-world in Japan. This seemingly

shows admiration for Japanese female artists but at the same time, it overlooks the complexity and subtlety of their voices since their inner *selves* are ignored.

Reed praises Eastern arts while denying their "profundity or philosophic wisdom" (2: 560). A similar way of praising Eastern arts can be seen in Wilde's article when he praises Mr. Henley's poem on a painting by Toyokuni, which reads as follows:

> "Clear shine the hills; the rice-fields round
> Two cranes are circling; sleepy and slow,
> A blue canal the lake's blue bound
> Breaks at the bamboo bridge; and lo!
> Touched with the sundown's spirit and glow,
> I see you turn, with flirted fan,
> Against the plum-tree's bloomy snow . . .
> I loved you once in old Japan! ("A Note" 2: 109)

Wilde observes that "[t]he Toyokuni colour-print that suggested it [the poem] could not be more delightful. It seems to have kept all the wilful fantastic charm of the original" ("A Note" 2: 108-09).

What is important here is that Wilde praises the poem because it detaches external beauty from the inner voice of the painting, which is reminiscent of Whistler and Walter Pater, who prioritise visual effects over subjects. Wilde argues that "Mr. Henley's healthy, if sometimes misapplied, confidence in the myriad suggestions of life gives him his charm. He is made to sing along the highways, not to sit down and write. If he took himself more seriously his work would become trivial" ("A Note" 2: 109). The use of the imagery of Japanese art, without attaching any serious subject to it, can be art in itself for Wilde. However, the poem is written to a lady with a "flirted fan," and each stanza ends with the sentence "I loved you once in old Japan"

("A Note" 2: 109). By employing the superficial imagery of a Japanese colour-print, and ignoring what Toyokuni, the painter, tries to narrate, Henley associates the "old" East with a fantasised, desirable figure of a woman, who could be seen as confined in the very situation that female writers try to avoid: Florence Layard claimed that Oriental women were oppressed because their countries were uncivilised and Christianity had not reached them. Unlike Gothic Revivalists, by emphasising Eastern countries' pre-modern state, Layard might have tried to differentiate herself from Eastern or Oriental women, so often figured as fantasised, desirable female objects, deprived of their voices.[18]

At the same time, some female elite writers strategically employ this device of self-consciously superficial beauty. As we have seen, Mary Reed praises the superficial beauty of work by Japanese female writers because it is equal to that by male writers (2: 560). Graham R. Tomson (the pseudonym for Rosamund Marriott Watson) further quotes a German proverb, in "Beauty, from the Historical Point of View. —I": "Every woman would rather be handsome than good" (2: 454), which contradicts Ruskin's or Morris's ideas, which connect decoration to morality[19] or even Mrs Haweis's, which advocates that outer and inner beauty should harmonise.

The Female Artist

I now examine Wilde's attitudes to elite and popular Aestheticism further and assess whether he genuinely enhances the opportunities for women. Therefore, in this section I will further analyse the writings of female elite contributors to *The Woman's World*, who try to establish the authority of female fine artists by distancing themselves from both decorative arts, and from consumer culture in general. In some of these articles, the female contributors try to set up their own gaze in response to the power of that possessed by the male artists. Graham R. Tomson,

for instance, notes how they objectify their female models:

> . . . . As a rule, the poet draws his inspiration not from the actual features of his mistress, but from her wardrobe and her jewel-casket.
>
> Her lips are rubies and her teeth are pearls; her complexion is like alabaster or satin; diamonds or crystals are her eyes; her hair is golden wire, and so on; his verses sparkle like her brocades, and both are beautiful, but seldom with distinctly human beauty. ("Beauty II" 2: 539)

Tomson notices the selfishness of such a male gaze in bygone days, and seems to imply that it ignores alternative stories from the women's side, or the inner mind of the female model. A similar objectification can be seen in Mr. Henley's poem, or in the first of the triolets I quoted at the beginning of this paper. In these examples, it is notable that female figures are often compared to natural objects like flowers or decorative arts in the house. The title illustrations of the fashion articles also substantiate this association.

It might be in counteracting this male gaze that some female writers had a strong preference for high culture above decorative arts in *The Woman's World*. Many elite contributors to the magazine insist that a woman can be as good an artist as a man. In "The Fallacy of the Superiority of Man" (1887), Laura M'Laren [McLaren], known for her contributions to the *Women's Suffrage Journal*, argues that potential female artists merely lack educational opportunity: "So long as women were excluded from schools of painting where live models were studied and anatomy taught, so long their work remained that of amateurs" (1: 57).

Some contributors still believe, however, that women cannot be artistically equal to men. Lucy M. J. Garnett, for example, who directly

opposes Laura M‘Laren’s article, insists that men and women have different characteristics: men are “originating and creative” whilst women are “receptive and elaborative” (1: 531). Garnett questions M‘Laren’s opinion that it is men’s jealousy that keeps women from succeeding in science, literature, or fine art, for Garnett believes there is not enough proof (1: 529). She further states that women stay at home “simply because such a life is, more or less, a natural one for them” not because men imprison women (1: 530). Here, fine art is deployed as the opposite of the home, where decorative arts are housed. In other words, we can see a stronger tension between women as “receptive” beings at home and women as artists with independent existences; and here, art means fine art such as painting or writing, not house decoration (decorative arts in the house) or dress, unlike in the popular articles in the same magazine.

Through the examination above, it is clear that female writers and artists who show a strong preference for high art tend to show contempt or ambivalence towards decorative arts and the fashion world in their writings. It appears that differentiating themselves in this way is a precondition of escaping from stereotypical associations with femininity, and allows them to attempt to express their individuality through fine art, as creative agents.

Wilde’s Rhetoric of the Woman Artist

It is clear that Wilde, the magazine’s editor, took a complex approach to both fine and decorative arts. In the earlier section, we saw that he praised Eastern decorative arts as having external beauty without meaning. In this section, I will further show that he is prepared to acknowledge house decoration (decorative arts in the house) and dress as fine art, just as popular Aesthetic writers also insisted in the magazine; at the same time, I will show that Wilde seeks to deploy language as an ornament with which to create visual effects. Then I

will examine whether the insistence of recent critics that Wilde opens up an opportunity for women is accurate.

When Wilde discusses Mary Robinson's poems in "A Note on Some Modern Poets" (1888), he first says she is "[n]ot a poet in the true creative sense," but praises her because she is "a very perfect artist in poetry, using language as one might use a very precious material and producing her best work by the rejection of the great themes and large intellectual motives that belong to fuller and richer song" (2: 112). The quality that Wilde appreciates in these poems is that she deals with words as a "precious material" by themselves, rather than as a medium to express "great themes" (2: 112). In another passage on a female poet, Wilde insists that she "treats language as a fine material" as he says, "Mrs. Tomson [*sic;* Graham R. Tomson or Rosamund Marriott Watson] has certainly a very refined sense of form" ("Some Literary Notes" June 1889, 2: 448). He describes her shorter poem as "little carved ivories of speech," using Pater's phrase (2: 448). Although we have seen Paterian attitudes towards artworks in the articles in *The Woman's World*, this is the first time that his name is clearly mentioned by Wilde. Employing the words of his master, Walter Pater, Wilde emphasises that the poetess deals in what is called "little carved ivories of speech" (2: 448), rather than "great themes." We have seen that Graham R. Tomson, who is discussed here, criticises the male gaze that compares the female figure with decorative arts, and declares that beauty comes before goodness, so it is interesting that Wilde here likens Tomson's work to that of Pater. Wilde, in a sense, casts a male gaze upon Tomson, since he compares her work to a beautiful object. However, it is not Tomson herself but her work that Wilde is writing about and he aligns her work with Pater's concept.

Wilde twists contemporary notions of literature and femininity by insisting that femininity might be the key to improve English literature: "Women seem to me to possess just what our literature wants, a light

touch, a delicate hand, a graceful mode of treatment, and an unstudied felicity of phrase" ("Some Literary Notes" Jan. 1889, 2: 164). This description interestingly overlaps with the characteristics that Wilde claims for Eastern decorative arts, from which female writers of elite articles and artists try to differentiate themselves. This could also, however, be seen as covertly reinstating a highly traditional image of femininity. Wilde, again, is able to share in the contemporary male gaze, which observes the female figure as a voiceless object; yet he says that this is exactly the thing that can improve literature as a fine art. By aligning seemingly contradictory elements at that time—femininity and fine art—Wilde uniquely or somewhat equivocally may be regarded as affirming the power of women as artists.

Wilde also opens up further opportunities for women by admitting that dealing with decorative arts and dress is related to intellectual work. In "Literary and Other Notes" (1887), he agrees with Phyllis Browne (Sarah Sharp Hamer), a manual book writer, by admitting that needle-workers and housekeepers could be at the same time "the greatest woman-mathematician[s] of any age" (1: 82). Needle-work and house-keeping here are closely associated with intellectual capacity. Wilde further acknowledges that fashion is something which should be historically recorded in the same article (1: 84-85) and claims, in another article, that "I myself would like to see dressmaking regarded not merely as a learned profession, but as a fine art" and favourably writes about female dressmakers ("Literary" Jan. 1888, 1: 136). Still, we may recall that in the first letter that Wilde sent to Wemyss Reid, the general manager of Cassel and Co., he clearly drew a line between popular and elite articles. Indeed, in the magazine, although Wilde repeatedly suggests that decorative arts could be regarded as fine art, especially for women, at other times he leaves a clear border between the two domains: "there must always be a great difference between those purely decorative arts that glorify their own material, and the

more imaginative arts in which the material is, as it were, annihilated, and absorbed into the creation of a new form" ("A Fascinating Book" 2: 53). To understand this point further, it would be helpful to refer to his article, which appeared in *Pall Mall Gazette*, after Wilde listened to an Arts and Crafts lecture on bookbinding in 1888: Wilde disagrees with the idea that one can express oneself through producing decorative arts ("Beauties" 105-06). He argues, "These handicrafts are not primarily expressive arts, they are impressive arts" ("Beauties" 106). Wilde saw crafting decorative arts as "art" but not as a means of self-expression, unlike "expressive arts" like "poetry, painting, and sculpture" ("Beauties" 106).

Wilde, thus, acknowledges the status of both fashion and fine art by women. He does so by playfully combining concepts which were seen at the time as contradictory; that is, historical value and dress, as well as joviality (connected to femininity) and fine art. Although he persists in a clear distinction between fine and decorative arts, for him, to be an artist is to create beautiful effects, not necessarily to express oneself or for any other purposes. Here, Wilde establishes his own definition of art. In addition, the fact that Wilde emphasises the possibility for women to be artists, by using his rhetoric of displaying "contradictory" notions together, is important as this rhetoric is one way that Wilde doubts and mocks both the traditional and contemporary concepts of his time. This would remind us of Lord Henry's remark in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible" (23).

Conclusion

In *The Woman's World*, Eastern products and, indeed, decorative arts in general are at the intersecting point of elite and popular Aestheticism, and also engage with the tension between women as objectified

figures and independent agents. Most of the female writers of elite articles and writers on fashion texts are obsessed with the expression of individuality, or the desire not to be objectified—either by the marketplace's rhetoric or the male gaze. *The Woman's World*, in the end, celebrates women as artists in the fields of both fine and decorative arts. Thus, Wilde contributes to the opening up of an opportunity for women to be artists. However, he was far from being alone in doing so. It is the interaction between Wilde and other contributors—both those writing on fine and on decorative arts (fashion) or through the inclusion of articles with different views towards arts—that enhances the chance for women to be "artists," or creative agents by connecting high-art and consumer culture.

What is more, Wilde (like some other elite article contributors) does not focus on individuality, with which his contemporary middle class were obsessed, but rather deliberately overlooks the inner voice, and commends instead visual or surface beauty. Whilst Wilde admits female artists in both decorative and fine arts, he himself highlights his own way of seeing art. We can now recollect "The Preface" of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which appeared in *Fortnightly Review* in 1891, two years after Wilde's editorship of the magazine had ceased:

> *All art is at once surface and symbol.*
> *Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.*
> *Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.*
> *It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.* (*Picture* 3)

For Wilde, decorative and fine arts are both art as far as they are beautiful, albeit with different characteristics between them. Thus, *The Woman's World* was the place for popular and elite writers as well as for Oscar Wilde to establish themselves or/and female consumers as artists in the contemporary world by offering different definitions of arts.

*This paper was developed from chapter six of the author's PhD thesis: Miho Wako. "Figured in Lively Paint: Eastern Decorative Art, English Aestheticism, and Consumer Culture 1862-1900." PhD dissertation. U of Warwick, 2012.

NOTES

1 Loretta Clayton ("Arbiter"), Laurel Brake and Stephanie Green are some other examples of scholars who have praised this magazine for including articles presenting progressive images of women of the time.

2 For the detailed history of design reform and the South Kensington Museum, see Snodin 67-69; Livingstone 78-79.

3 See Snodin 72, 80, 85.

4 See Snodin 86-88.

5 For more information on *Japonisme* and Aestheticism, see Aslin 79-96, Spencer 43-77. Also, for the image of the Eastern decorative arts, see Wako 7-26.

6 Although Curtis Marez (1997) significantly observes that we can find references to "non-Western ornamentation" (264) to "inspire the fashion choices of wealthy English women" in *The Woman's World* (265), his observation does not specify how important these elements are for the magazine.

7 For the definition of Aestheticism, see Aslin (13-35), Spencer (7-42), Parry (56-57) and Lambourne (*Aesthetic Movement* 6-25).

8 When Wilde joined the team, the magazine was still called *The Lady's World*. Following Wilde's advice, Wemyss Reid agreed to change the title to *The Woman's World* in September 1887 ("To Wemyss" 317-18). The idea was originally proposed to Wilde by the novelist Dinah Craik (Brake 128).

9 There are quite a few articles on decorative arts and dress in general as well as on literature and fine art in *The Woman's World* but in this paper, I preferentially dealt with articles referring to Eastern arts.

10 See Ellen T. Masters' "Quaint" 2: 383 for the example.

11 Violette also associates women's dress with "a picture by a great

painter" ("April Fashions" 1: 285).

12 For details on this matter, see Cohen 65-76.

13 See "November Fashions" 2: 17, for example.

14 See Cohen 74-75.

15 For more information on the relationship between Liberty's and Aestheticism, see Adburgham 27-34.

16 See Aslin 80-81; Lambourne, *Japonisme* 90.

17 This article introduces Japanese culture with reference to its history as well as its dress so it may be categorised as an "elite" article.

18 The objectification of the East and Eastern women by Victorian female writers is of course problematic, but in this paper I focus on how these images were used.

19 See Cohen 24-25; 78-79.

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