

CULTURAL CONTINUITY IN MUSEUM SPACE: THE CESNOLA COLLECTION OF THE MET IN EDITH WHARTON'S *THE AGE OF INNOCENCE*

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INTRODUCTION

In her excellent biography of Edith Wharton, Hermione Lee describes the role of the Cesnola Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art for Wharton in general terms: “[i]t provides a fine example for Wharton of civilizations passing and succeeding each other, since the collection goes from the late Bronze Age through the successive arrivals in Cyprus of a great many ‘foreigners’: Phoenicians, Assyrians, Egyptians, Persians and Greeks, even, legend has it, the heroes from the Trojan war, passing through on their way home”¹. Lee’s commentary is made in relation to the appearance of the Collection in Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* (1920), a novel about the passing of genteel civilization² in the US in the 1870s–90s. The novel was written right after the Great War that also threatened “the wiping out of an entire civilization.”³

This essay wishes to explicate the role of the Cesnola Collection as Wharton’s case study for preserving and understanding objects of a civilization from the past in *The Age of Innocence*. It argues that the Cesnola Collection represents Wharton’s general interest in the way the historical continuity of cultures can be maintained and experienced, and the story of Archer’s decomposing world is one manifestation of this concern after the Great War.

Karin Roffman’s illuminating discussion of Wharton and nineteenth-century US museum culture examines the role of the Cesnola Collection for Wharton from a memory studies framework. Roffman explains that Wharton’s use of the Cesnola in the Met as a prop in *The Age* forms part of her ongoing interest in museums and in the possibility of educating and elevating Americans culturally by exposing them to objects of material

¹ Hermione Lee, *Edith Wharton* (London: Vintage, 2008), 578.

² George Santayana, “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy,” in Richard Colton Lyn, ed., *Santayana on America: Essays, Notes, and Letters on American Life, Literature, and Philosophy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1968), 40.

³ Lee, *Edith Wharton*, 579.

culture in museum space.⁴ Roffman starts out with Wharton's belief in visual education and the general culturally elevating power of learning to see art in *The Decoration of Houses* (1899).⁵ Even in Wharton's novel *Sanctuary* (1903), the museum appears as a secularized sacred space in which a connection with the past can be affected.⁶ However, Roffman claims, by the time of writing *The Age* (1920), Wharton's initial belief in museum-induced visual education of American audiences had already been frustrated because instead of a place for learning the museum has become a place for spectacle,⁷ and the Cesnola appears in the novel as an illustration of that disappointment.

To my mind, Roffman's idea positions the museum in Wharton as a special memory space described by Pierre Nora. Nora theorizes sites of memory as special places where a connection with the past can be recreated even by communities in post-secular industrial societies.⁸ This model offers a wider framework to see Wharton's concern with the sense of the past. Both Nora's idea of sites of memory and Jan Assmann's notion of a long-term communal cultural memory as preserved in the form of "texts, rites, images, building, monuments"⁹ allow us to see Wharton's museum as a site where cultural memory is at work. Nora and Assmann echo the notion of sacred space in Mircea Eliade's ethnographic account of how sacred religious experience happens in primitive societies. Eliade asks a question about possible ways to represent religious experience in a post-secular society¹⁰ and an ethnographic description of religious experience in the form of sacred space and sacred time is his solution to the problem. In turn, Roffman's article about Wharton's disillusionment with museum space where wealth is on display would indicate that for Wharton it was the museum that should have worked and eventually failed as a site of memory in industrialized America, because instead of educating the public it became a place where expensive acquisitions could be viewed.¹¹

⁴ Karin Roffman, *From the Modernist Annex: American Women Writers in Museums and Libraries* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 30.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 32; 37–8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁸ Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (Spring, 1989): 12–3.

⁹ Jan Assmann, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," *New German Critique* 65 (Spring / Summer, 1995): 127–28.

¹⁰ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trusk (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1963), 13.

¹¹ Roffman, *From the Modernist*, 65.

My idea is to explicate Wharton's concern with cultural continuity represented by her use of the Cesnola Collection on the basis of her *French Ways and Their Meaning* (1919), a work she published right before *The Age*. *French Ways* is a nonfiction introduction to French manners and thinking, an ethnographically oriented study of French culture for the US audience. Wharton identifies values she considers to be key features of French culture: reverence, taste, honesty, continuity. Whilst presenting the French case, she also constructs oppositions between French and Anglo-Saxon ways of thinking based on their different relation to tradition and social manners. Wharton's much-discussed analysis of French women's social roles constitutes one chapter of the book, which indeed has been used to analyze her Europeanized heroines, for instance Ellen.¹²

I propose to look at Wharton's chapter on "Continuity" in *French Ways* as a context for her concern with ancient Cypriot objects in *The Age*. My hypothesis is that the story of the Cesnola in the Met illustrates a breach of continuity in the Museum, the institution which, theoretically, serves to maintain continuity. The essay describes the Cesnola Collection and its appearances in *The Age*, then it proceeds to discuss the notion of continuity in *French Ways* in order to be able to showcase a concern with the lack of continuity in Archer's story. Eventually, the immediate origin of the concern with the passing of civilizations will be located in the culturally destructive post-war context.

THE CESNOLA COLLECTION AND THE NOVEL

The Cesnola Collection of classical antiquities from Cyprus was compiled by Palma Cesnola between 1865–1871. Luigi Palma di Cesnola was an officer for the Kingdom of Savoy, who emigrated to the US in the late 1850s. He volunteered for and fought in the Civil War, was discharged in 1864, and secured the post of the American consul in Cyprus by the end of 1865. Once settled in Larnaca, he took up an interest in ancient material culture and began excavations: there were no local laws regulating this practice in Cyprus at the time.¹³ Cesnola did not document his excavations as would be the expectation by later standards of archeological work. He "did not hesitate to piece together"¹⁴ relics that originally belonged to different objects, either, to be able to produce full objects. His most celebrated find was the so called "Kourion Treasure", a rich cache of tomb object

¹² Virginia Ricard, "Isn't that French?": Edith Wharton revisits the 'International Theme,'" in *Edith Wharton's The Age of Innocence: New Centenary Essays*, ed. Arielle Zibrak (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 82.

¹³ Vassos Karageorghis, *Ancient Art from Cyprus: The Cesnola Collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

from Southwest Cyprus.¹⁵ In this case he documented his excavations of priceless gold ornaments in subterranean caves of the area to authenticate his findings. Yet he claimed to have found together objects originating from vastly different historical and cultural periods and subsequent excavations evidence only his opening of tombs.¹⁶ Vassos Karageorghis claims that Cesnola was doubtless inspired by Heinrich Schliemann's contemporaneous findings in Troy (1871–1890) and Mycena (1871–94), trying to rival him.¹⁷ By today's standards, one certainly has reason to ask if Cesnola was plundering Cyprus for material gain, or at least state that he was "more interested in finding, selling, and possessing antiquities than in studying them."¹⁸

The Cesnola Collection was acquired by the Met in 1872¹⁹ and was put on display in 1874. The Cesnola Collection has enjoyed a varied reputation among the assets of the museum. As Lee remarks, "its collection of tomb objects from Cyprus, in what is now the medieval sculpture hall of the Met, was in fact a great draw when the museum opened."²⁰ However, as Macaulay explains further, "within decades of the Met's purchase of the Cesnola Collection, subsequent curators, trustees, and directors saw it as a disappointment",²¹ because it was not comprised of classical Greek objects and the collection was "relegated to the second floor where they remain today, far from the Greek and Roman galleries, which occupy prime real estate on the ground floor."²² The story of the catalogues to the Collection would explain this "progress" in detail,²³ however, for our purposes here it is enough to point out that by 2020 the anniversary publication of the Met contains commentary on the reception of the Collection and provides the much needed self-referential commentary²⁴ in curatorial work.

¹⁵ Ibid., 6.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 5–6.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Macaulay, "Making the Met 1870–2020: A Universal Museum for the Twenty-first Century," *American Journal of Archeology* 125, no. 2 (2021): 322.

¹⁹ Ibid., 321.

²⁰ Lee, *Edith Wharton*, 578.

²¹ Macaulay, "Making the Met," 322.

²² Ibid.

²³ First it was put on show under Cesnola's direction and reorganized soon. In 2000 the new catalogue was published to document the establishment of four Cypriot galleries, see Karageorghis's *Ancient Art*.

²⁴ Andrea Bayer, "Preface," in Andrea Bayer and Laura D. Corey, eds., *Making the Met: 1870–2020* (New York: MetPublications, 2020), 11–3. James E. Young and Richard Crownshaw draw attention to the need for self-referentiality and de-naturalisation in the construction of the past in public monuments (see James E. Young "The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History," in Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nün-

The Cesnola Collection appears in *The Age of Innocence* twice, first as the setting of a private meeting and second as that of a public event. Back in the 1870s Archer and Ellen meet alone for the last time in the Cesnola Rooms of the Met: when Ellen asks where they could meet in private, Archer suggests the Museum in the Park in the early afternoon, as it is empty. Against the glass cases of objects marked “use unknown”,²⁵ Ellen seems to be the most valuable exhibit in the room for Archer. They discuss the chance of a life together: if it is not possible to step outside of society by running away, then there is a chance for an everyday affair instead. They dislike this option as well, and settle instead for one meeting before Ellen returns to her husband. The tomb objects of the Collection around them communicate no story to them. Instead, Archer studies Ellen as a valuable perfect museum object that needs to be preserved, exhibited, and is worth of study.²⁶

The second appearance of the Cesnola in the novel is a public ceremony at the old Cesnola rooms in the 1900s. Archer, now a widow, reconsiders his life as a married man in his library. His thoughts have been prompted by a visit to the new galleries of the Metropolitan Museum: what used to be the old Cesnola rooms,²⁷ where he had met Ellen. In *The Age*, the Cesnola rooms have been repurposed, as have Archer’s life and library,²⁸ but he still seems complacent. His library used to be the space of his books and imaginative life, but twenty five years later he thinks of it as a space where the most “real”²⁹ things of his life happened in relation to his family: his wife told him of her pregnancy here, this was the place for the first steps of his son, subsequent major family discussions took place in it. Although he feels he had missed “the flower of life”,³⁰ he seems not to

ning, eds., *Cultural Memory Studies: Media and Cultural Memory* [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008], 362) and museum space (see Richard Crownshaw, *The Afterlife of Holocaust Memory in Contemporary Literature and Culture* [London: Palgrave, 2010], 234). Both essays represent a new-historicist turn towards how the visitor is involved in and inspired by art, for which see György Endre Szőnyi, “A hatalom terei és jelképei a Mediciék Firenzéjében,” in Éva Szirmai, Szergej Tóth, and Edit Újvári, eds., *A hatalom jelei, képei és terei* (Szeged: JGYF Kiadó, 2016), 219.

²⁵ Edith Wharton, “The Age of Innocence,” in *The Age of Innocence: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Cadence Waid (New York: Norton, 2003), 186.

²⁶ Against her custom of historical precision, Wharton’s representation of the setting is anachronistic. The Museum moved into its Park location in 1880, and the Cesnola Collection could be visited there only afterwards. Wharton’s intensification of these elements into one location serves the purpose of providing the most characteristic museum setting for the novel.

²⁷ Wharton, “The Age of Innocence,” 206.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 208.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 206.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 208.

mind this fact any more: "but he thought of it [the flower of life] now as a thing so unattainable and improbable that to have repined would have been like despairing because one had not drawn the first prize in a lottery."³¹ The stakes were against him having the flower of life, and Ellen "had become the composite vision of what he had missed."³² The image of Ellen in the Met in the Cesnola rooms together with his attachment to her have all become part of a vision, a vision of the happier past he had missed and the memory of which has been relegated to some rarely visited recess of his mind, a rarely visited museum object. From this vantage point, Archer's whole relation to Ellen seems like an analogy to the story of the Cesnola Collection.

CONTINUITY IN *FRENCH WAYS AND THEIR MEANING*

In her chapter on museums and memory in Wharton's novels, Karin Roffman considers the Cesnola Collection in the context of Wharton's relation to contemporary US museum culture. Roffman argues that by 1920 Wharton had become disappointed in museums as institutions of cultural education because she saw that the insistence on the practical use of museums prevented these institutions from providing aesthetic education into understanding art.³³ In what follows I would like to complement Roffman's discussion by introducing the aspects of continuity and war. The idea of "continuity" possibly preserved by aesthetic education appears in Wharton's wartime nonfiction text *French Ways and Their Meaning* and eventually I wish to link it to the Cesnola setting in *The Age*.

French Ways defines the concept of "continuity" in the framework of a simple contrast between French and American (US) cultures. French culture relies on traditions going back to prehistoric times, whilst Anglo-Saxon US culture is based on a "violent cutting off from all their past."³⁴ On the one hand, French sense of continuity means tradition, i. e. "the handing on the trick which has already been handed on to him";³⁵ an uninterrupted culture³⁶ possibly from prehistoric times but surely from ancient Mediterranean culture. French cultural continuity also means a set of abilities:

surviving cataclysms, perpetuating traditions, handing down and down and down certain ways of ploughing and sowing and vine-dressing and dyeing and tanning and

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Roffman, *From the Modernist*, 32.

³⁴ Edith Wharton, *French Ways and Their Meaning* (New York: D. Appleton, 1919), 82.

³⁵ Ibid., 77.

³⁶ Ibid., 80.

working and hoarding, in the same valleys and on the same riverbanks as their immemorially remote predecessors.³⁷

As a result, Wharton claims, the French not only cling to their country but also renounce adventure, risk, and spontaneity, especially in matters of money.³⁸ This is the price to be paid for maintaining accumulated cultural knowledge and social status.

On the other hand, American ancestors started a new community in a new continent. The English Puritans intended to gain "greater liberty for the development of their political and religious ideas",³⁹ and were never forcefully driven from England. The settlers "set out to create a new state in a new hemisphere, in a new climate, and out of new materials",⁴⁰ and although they carried their "prejudices, principles, laws and beliefs"⁴¹ with them, pioneer experience required constant improvisation and adaptation, spontaneity and benevolence.⁴² So according to Wharton, the pioneer experience was a further requirement for flouting tradition and breaking away from inheritance.⁴³

The contrast between French cultural continuity and the US break away from tradition gives a chance for reflection at the time of the Great War, Wharton claims earlier in the book. Americans can learn from the French⁴⁴ now that surface barriers between them have been broken down by the emergencies of the war.⁴⁵ The important connection between France and the US lies in both nations wanting to be free first of all and have a voice in governing their country.⁴⁶ The real contrast, it appears, is between France and the US on one side and Germany on the other, Wharton explains.⁴⁷

In *French Ways* Wharton argues that despite the assumed contrast between the French and Americans based on their different relations to tradition, it is rather their common need for freedom that should define the way they think of their relation. This approach repositions the line of cultural contrast from between the French and the Amer-

³⁷ Ibid., 82.

³⁸ Ibid., 87.

³⁹ Ibid., 84.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 82.

⁴¹ Ibid., 83.

⁴² Ibid., 84.

⁴³ Ibid., 97.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 14.

icans to that between the Germans on one side and opposed to the French and Americans on the other. The pre-war polarized cultural contrast has given way to another, war-time contrast in which Americans can actually learn from the French about continuity and taste and education.

AMBIGUOUS POSITIONS

French Ways and *The Age of Innocence* put forward two different views about possible US approaches to continuity. *French Ways*, as we have seen, starts out with a simplified opposition between Latin and Anglo-Saxon relations to tradition but its aim is to overcome that divide and instruct its American readers in how to see with the French eye, how to consider cultural conservatism as a means of maintaining connection, i.e. in a positive way. In contrast, *The Age of Innocence* presents the story of Newland Archer's failed romance with Europeanized Ellen Olenska as a case in which Archer fails to learn to see with Ellen's French eyes, and the Cesnola becomes the reminder of that failure in the novel.

Newland Archer and Ellen in *The Age* never have a chance to start a relationship because they represent two different cultural attitudes. A large part of Ellen's allure in the 1870s was her international background: she lived and married in Europe, she had entertained aristocrats, she had overseen the conspicuous consumption of much larger amounts of money than any in Archer's US social circles. Her manners, her opinions, her looks are all connected to her European side, and this makes the young Archer assume her to be an oversexualized Frenchwoman.⁴⁸ It is a critical tenet that the Archer-Olenska connection is an example of the "international theme",⁴⁹ a meditation about the possibility of cultural connection between US and French poles. The widowed Archer confesses he had missed the flower of life, and Ellen serves as a composite vision of what he had missed.⁵⁰ He reconciles to the impossibility of cultural connection when he acknowledges he had missed the flower of life. Archer tried to break out of the manners and social conventions of his social set through his emotional attachment to the young Ellen, but eventually gave up that attempt and remained an exemplary specimen of old New York high society. His memory of Ellen is a vision of what he did not attain, the reminder of a failed attempt at acquiring the flower of life. Obviously, it was the "American" Archer who missed the flower of European ("French") life.

⁴⁸ Virginia Ricard, "Edith Wharton's French Engagement," in Laura Rattray and Jennifer Haytock, eds., *A New Edith Wharton Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 86–7.

⁴⁹ Ricard, "Isn't that French?", 83–4.

⁵⁰ Wharton, "The Age of Innocence," 208.

How can the Cesnola setting be linked to the story of Archer's well-known failure? From the perspective of *French Ways*, the exhibit of the Cesnola in *The Age* illustrates a breach of continuity in the museum, as it indicates the inability of the museum spectacle to connect the visitor with cultural practices of an earlier civilization. The Cesnola Collection in the Met could have functioned as a site for aesthetic education that connected visitors with a sense of the past, i.e. continuity in the sense *French Ways* defines it. Indeed, the Cesnola was acquired to document the continuity of statuettes and other objects from diverse periods of Cypriot cultural history. Yet its subsequent criticism due to its unprofessional methods of excavation questioned its status and value and the collection was soon sidelined. Instead of showcasing continuity, it became a sign of the early museum-makers' effort and failure to secure cultural capital for the new museum. One could even view it, ironically, as Wharton's example of American (US) blindness for French (European) continuity. In that sense, the Cesnola represents a missed chance on the part of the Met to constitute a site for the study and experience of continuity, it stands in for a failed attempt.

Perhaps it is not far-fetched to argue at this point that Archer's failed romance with Ellen echoes the story of the failed attempt the Cesnola Collection stands in for: a missed chance for a much needed US connection with French continuity. However, such a reading contradicts the main argument of *French Ways* about the possibility of a changing US attitude to tradition at the cataclysmic time of war. In other words, if it is *French Ways* that you read from the perspective of *The Age*, then you see the argument about the possibility of acquiring tradition more like a wish than an actual option.

In sum, the Cesnola Collection seems doubly motivated as a setting for Archer's failed romance in Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*. On the one hand, it implies the inability of the American museum to perform visual instruction of the visitor's eye. On the other hand, it also serves to question the possibility of US audiences learning the see the French way as a result of the alliance with France in the war.