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Wharton's Curtains Are Recreated; Renoir's Letters Go on Sale

By EVE M. KAHN

WHARTON'S WINDOWS, DRESSED HER WAY



LENOX, Mass. — Edith Wharton worked while still in bed at her home here, with newspapers, books and sleeping dogs strewn around her on pink bedspreads. At times she wrote about her own attitudes toward bedroom décor.

She preferred beds that faced the windows, in rooms freed of “heavy window draperies and tufted furniture,” she and the architect Ogden Codman Jr. advised in an 1897 decorating guide.

No one knows how closely she followed her own rules at her lavish house, named the [Mount](#) and now a museum. Few photos of the private spaces survive, and original furnishings were dispersed decades ago. The staff has spent years researching and trying to recreate Wharton’s room settings.

Commissioning curtains alone has been tricky. “It’s almost like creating a soufflé with fabric,” Christine [Kalafus](#), a seamstress and designer, said on a steamy

recent morning, while hanging new drapes in Wharton's boudoir, next to her bedroom.

Ms. Kalafus, advised by Mount trustees including the Manhattan interior designer Michael Simon, has sewn cotton toile curtains with hundreds of linear feet of ruffled, scalloped trim. The red fabric is printed with scenes of French medieval peasants, to match early 1900s drapes just legible in an old photo of the room.

The boudoir's couch and chaise longue have been upholstered in the same cotton. "It is a good plan to cover all the chairs and sofas in the bedroom suite with slips matching the window curtains," Codman and Wharton wrote.

Ms. Kalafus was replacing another set of reproduction drapes, installed a few years ago; the print was muddy, and the layers of fabric looked heavy and stiff.

Susan Wissler, the Mount's executive director, came by to see the new ruffled set. "I love the translucence," she said. "These are actually going to move in the wind."

Reproductions of Wharton's letters and rough drafts have been laid out here and there in the bedroom suite. Chinese porcelain bowls are set on the floors; Wharton used similar floral vessels as water bowls for her dogs. On one marble mantelpiece, as in Wharton's day, framed photos show her husband, Teddy; her close confidant Walter Berry; and her cruel and fickle lover, the journalist Morton Fullerton.

In Teddy's adjoining bedroom suite at the Mount, her love poem "Terminus" is on view. It describes an adulterous night with Fullerton at a train station inn, in a room full of "dull impersonal furniture" and a bedspread made of "soot-sodden chintz."

RENOIR'S OWN ARCHIVE

Part of Pierre-Auguste Renoir's archive and his personal effects, down to his eyeglasses and family funeral receipts, have been stored at various spots in North America for decades. The collection is now headed for dispersal in New York.

On Sept. 19 the Dallas company [Heritage Auctions](#) will offer the material in Manhattan, divided into about 150 lots that include statues, photos, medals, books inscribed by other artists, clothing and paperwork. Letters and ledgers reveal details of the artist's travels, inspirations for paintings and relationships with models and dealers, and his mundane concerns about unpaid bills, sun damage to his furniture and a burial spot for a family dog.

Starting in the 1970s, Renoir descendants moved with the artifacts from France

to Canada and then Texas. In 2005 a Maryland auction house offered the material as one lot, estimated around \$150,000. It did not sell, and unnamed buyers who emerged afterward, based in Arizona, are the Heritage consignors.

Heritage decided that offering it as one lot again would be impractical. “It’s just too unwieldy for someone to really put a value on it,” Brian Roughton, the company’s director of American and European art, said in a phone interview.

Some scholars are hoping that institutional buyers will make bulk purchases in September. The art historian Barbara E. White, who is working on a book, “Renoir’s Intimate Life Story,” wrote in an e-mail, “Keeping the letters together is important!”

JUDGING COVER BY ITS BOOK

The book designer Ernst Reichl, toward the end of a career that spanned from the 1920s to the 1970s, wrote critiques and explanations for his thousands of commissions on index cards. He described how budgets and publishers had encouraged and thwarted him as he dreamed up covers and page layouts for works by authors as prominent as James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Elie Wiesel and Joyce Carol Oates.

On the handwritten cards he evaluated his typeface experiments as “fresh, attractive and intelligent” or “a little too spectacular.” He noted whether titles had sold well or “laid an egg,” and described authors’ reactions. William Saroyan, upon seeing his 1934 story collection clad in Mr. Reichl’s choice of copper paper, “started to dance in the narrow hall in front of the elevator of Random House.”

Soon after Mr. Reichl’s death in 1980, his widow, Miriam, donated his [archive](#) and more than 1,000 books to Columbia’s Rare Book and Manuscript Library. A Reichl retrospective opens there on Monday, with evidence of how his Manhattan design studio laid out slashes and spirals of text and the occasional ribbon and fabric scrap.

“He was always looking for opportunities to do interesting things of a variety of natures,” Martha Scotford, the show’s main curator, said in a phone interview.

Last month Mr. Reichl’s daughter, the writer Ruth Reichl, stopped by Columbia to preview the show. She recalled how much her father, a German-Jewish immigrant, had revered the printed word.

“He would open a book, and he would pet the pages,” she said. She leafed through his childhood diary entries, which he had never shown to her, and a 1934 prototype jacket for Joyce’s “Ulysses” with towering, willowy type.

Ms. Reichl read some index cards aloud. She marveled at how her father had adapted plaid upholstery fabric for the spine of Gertrude Stein's 1934 "Portraits and Prayers," and had drawn a whimsical perched bird on a comma in an obscure self-help book about writing best sellers.

Mr. Reichl intended the autobiographical index cards to be used as teaching tools someday, she said, not to promote his own fame or recognizable style. He believed that whenever a book's designer was readily identifiable at first glance, it was "a failure," she added.

Despite his modesty, authors did become fans. Joyce Carol Oates, in an e-mail, wrote that he had produced "beautiful and thought-provoking" work for her 1960s and '70s novels. She added, "Ernst Reichl designed books as if they mattered, and as if they deserved to be around a long time."