

*The Magazine*

MAY/JUNE 2016

# ANTIQUES





## The Mount moves on

After decades on the brink, Edith Wharton's estate has become a model for preservation in this century



Model Natalia Vodianova descending the stairs of the Mount in Lenox, Massachusetts, in a photograph by Annie Leibovitz, 2012. © Annie Leibovitz.

The Mount, in Lenox, Massachusetts, was Edith Wharton's first great creation, the place where the former Edith Newbold Jones left the social bondage of Newport and New York to create the scaffolding for a new life. Her husband, Teddy Wharton, an amiable playboy, was along for the ride, of course, but not much more; his name does not appear on the original deed. After designing the house and its exceptional gardens, Wharton spent most summers at the Mount between 1902 and 1911, wrote *The House of Mirth* there, gathered material for *Summer* and *Ethan Frome*, and during those years experienced the sexual awakening that had eluded her in her marriage and that was to be crucial for the rest of her fiction.

Think of the Mount as a novel with a beginning, middle, and end for its author. When she was finished

with it, Wharton was ready to leave America with no regrets. There were, of course, other reasons for selling the Mount—her disintegrating marriage, her husband's mental and financial irregularities—but, really, her great creation was complete.

It is not surprising that preserving the Mount has become such a passionate cause over the years. The novelist who more than any other dramatized the social and sexual imprisonment of women struck her blow for freedom with this sublime creation. She grew beyond it to live in Europe, socializing with everyone who was anyone and writing many more books, but the Mount was where it all began.

Preserving the Mount has been successful because it has been done in the spirit of Edith Wharton without trying to compete with her. Remember, this



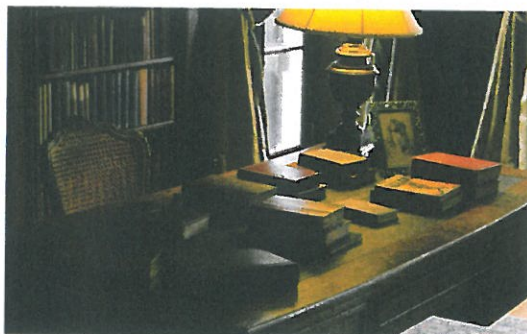
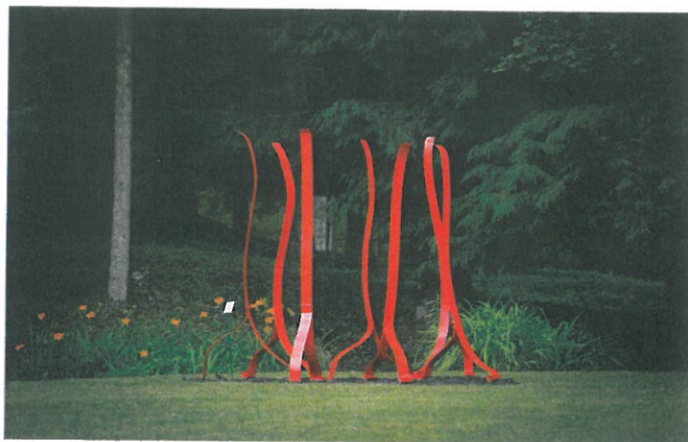
was a woman who rearranged every hotel room she entered to remedy an infelicitous placement of furniture or to arrange for a better angle of light. This was also the woman who is said to have requested an invitation to Isabella Stewart Gardner's Fenway Court only to find much to disdain in its decor. Bernard Berenson, who traveled in Europe with Wharton, reported that "a meal scarcely goes by without her returning nearly every dish." A preservation project in her exacting spirit would be an airless failure and this one is anything but.

There was also another Edith Wharton, a woman whose can-do spirit infuses the Mount in our time. Brave and uncomplaining, she went to the front in World War I with supplies and reported on the conditions there; she founded hostels for refugees and employed women left destitute by war. She was protean and adventurous and even wrote a fragment of pornography, *Beatrice Palmato*, that she bragged would make the efforts of others in this vein "look like nursery rhymes." She wasn't kidding.

However fastidious and demanding, Wharton was also a warm and loyal friend who once declared, "no one can love life as I do." True, even if few people ever asked as much of it. This, too, is the Edith Wharton one senses in the rooms of the Mount today.

Last year the big news was that the Mount had paid off the last of an \$8.5 million debt and brought to an end the much-publicized story of its years of struggle and near disaster. Today it is an open-ended adventure that does not bring to mind the words "house museum." It has a residency program for writers, contemporary sculpture in the gardens, music on the terrace, strong bonds with the community around it, and a relaxed atmosphere about itself and its mission. The furnishings are not Wharton's, and yet you can feel her here, particularly in her bedroom where she stayed in bed to write before having to dress in the elaborate armature of the day, and in the library where the books are hers and where her copy of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* bears her marks in appreciation of the wild emotions that warmed her soul. The Mount looks back and it looks beyond her. Edith Wharton would have approved.

The house and gardens are open from May to October, but there are exceptions so readers are advised to consult the website: [edithwharton.org](http://edithwharton.org)



*Metro* by Philip Marshall, 2015, was part of an installation at the Mount last summer presented by the Mount and SculptureNow. Photograph by John Seakwood.

View of the Mount from the French Flower Garden. Photograph by Dani Fine Photography.

Original volumes from Edith Wharton's personal library. Photograph by Jody Christopherson.