THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

REAL ESTATE | DESIGN

Gilded-Age Decorating Advice That Holds Up Today

Who knew Edith Wharton was a decorating genius? New York interior designer Thomas Jayne finds contemporary truths in her maxims, first published in 1897

New York City private library by Thomas Jayne **PHOTO:** DON FREEMAN

By Mieke Ten Have

Jan. 11, 2018 11:31 a.m. ET

0 COMMENTS

IN THE EARLY 20th century, the American author Edith Wharton wrote of her stately home and garden in the Massachusetts Berkshires, "...this place, every line of which is my own work, far surpasses 'The House of Mirth.'"

Best known for prose that illuminated the complexities and yearnings of the American elite into which she was born, Wharton was also an authority on classical design. An autodidact, she modeled her estate, the Mount, after an English 17th-century Restoration-style house. Open to the public, it now draws thousands of visitors a year.

In 1897, five years before the publication of her first novel, Wharton co-wrote "The Decoration of Houses" with architect Ogden Codman, Jr. This treatise on residential design remains of lasting interest to contemporary designers, including Thomas Jayne, known for interiors that artfully embrace and refresh historical tradition.

"'The Decoration of Houses' was a remarkably practical book that explains not just how but why you do something," said the New York-based Mr. Jayne, also a chair for that city's Winter Antiques Show later this month. "And then of course there's the whole literary quality of it."

He has revisited the book's maxims in a new guide of his own, "Classical Principles for Modern Design" (Monacelli). In it, as here, he illustrates Wharton and Codman, Jr.'s dictums through the lens of his own designs—taking the odd liberty in modernizing their spirit.

Montana Lodge by Thomas Jayne **PHOTO:** DON FREEMAN

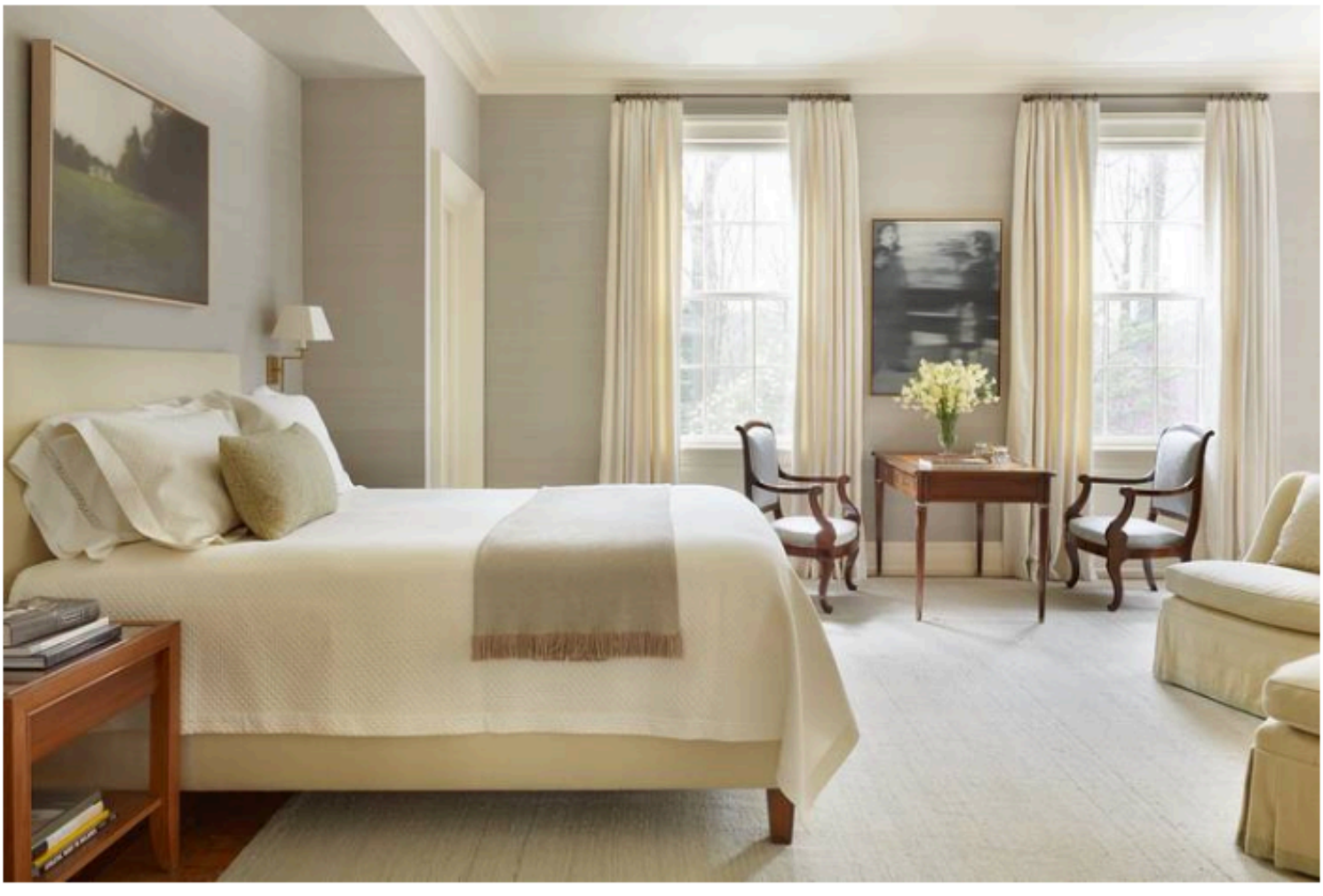
'It should be borne in mind of entrances...that, while the main purpose of a door is to admit, its secondary purpose is to exclude.'

FOYER CONSIDERATION Ms. Wharton believed homes should have distinct public and private spheres. "A vestibule signals you are entering into a private, protected space," said Mr. Jayne, who created one in this Montana lodge. After surrounding a fir and metal front door with glass sidelights and a transom, he delineated a type of antechamber by erecting a second frame with its own glass sidelights and transom. "It lets in the light but doesn't show too much to the outside world." Mr. Jayne selected a slate floor that also marks the entrance space as separate from the home's wood-floored main areas.

The dining room of a New York townhouse design by Thomas Jayne **PHOTO:** DON FREEMAN

'Architectural features...are part of the organism of every house, inside as well as out.'

STRONG BONES Wharton believed that architecture, both interior and exterior, was key to successful decorating. In its absence, Mr. Jayne creates it. When he found a series of original 18th-century Chinoiserie panels at Christie's Auction House in London, he turned to architect Peter Pennoyer to create a framework to showcase them in this Manhattan dining room. He also silver-leafed the cornice and moldings to boost the room's architectural gravitas. The vertical pilasters and wall paneling serve the classical imperative that the base and cornice be visually connected. Furthermore, the cornice moldings extended past the wall and onto the ceiling. "It's a good trick," said Mr. Jayne. "It makes a short room seem taller."



A Pennsylvania bedroom by Thomas Jayne **PHOTO:** PIETER ESTERSOHN

'Since bedrooms are no longer used as salons, there is no reason for decorating them in an elaborate manner; ...in this part of the house simplicity is the most fitting.'

A KIND OF HUSH When applying Wharton's dictate to simplify bedrooms, said Mr. Jayne, "the trick is to make an interesting quiet room as opposed to a cop-out quiet room." In this Pennsylvania space, he enlisted various textures—a cashmere throw, silk curtains and wallcovering, striéd wool carpet—in muted shades of gray, cream, white and pale blue. "What bolsters the seeming simplicity is many colors so close in value they all blend together," he said. The moody paintings, by Gerhard Richter, play against the otherwise neutral room but are still serene. "The bold colors of, say, Andy Warhol's Soup Cans wouldn't work," said Mr. Jayne.

New York City private library by Thomas Jayne **PHOTO:** DON FREEMAN

'If proportion is the good breeding of architecture, symmetry...may be defined as the sanity of decoration.'

UNBALANCING ACT In this New York apartment library designed by Mr. Jayne, an Italian mosaic fireplace provides a focal point, which he flanked symmetrically with mirrors, sconces and built-in oak bookcases. Further establishing a strong architectural balance in the Wharton tradition: a grid-like coffered ceiling with a light fixture dead center. The asymmetrical upholstered seating—a pair of sofas might have been more predictable—deliberately upsets the order, creating a pleasant tension. "I admire symmetry," said Mr. Jayne, "but you can't maintain it absolutely without looking foolish. It is particularly wonderful when you break it....The genius is having a symmetrical frame so it all looks at ease."

An Upper West Side bedroom by Thomas Jayne **PHOTO:** PIETER ESTERSOHN

'In decorating the walls of a room, the first point to be considered is whether they are to form a background for its contents, or to be in themselves chief decoration.'

STAR PLAYER The immersive landscape wallpaper by Gracie Studio established the agenda for this Manhattan bedroom. White, cream and violet hues subjugate the textiles to the wallcovering's palette. "You don't see any one thing first when you walk in," said Mr. Jayne. "We used curved forms for the upholstery and chairs to treat the room holistically." This room, he added, adheres to Wharton and Codman's rule, though in an unpredictable manner, that rooms have a cornice and base for visual harmony. Mr. Jayne added base molding, "but the way the paper's painted, the sky acts as a cornice," he said. "It was a kind of accidental genius."