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Introduction

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Decadence and Aestheticism through Fashion and Textiles: Guest Editors' Introduction

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[...] and now and then the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flitted across the long tussore-silk curtains that were stretched in front of the huge window, producing a kind of momentary Japanese effect [...]

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Chapter 1), 1891

The description of Basil Hallward's studio – provided in the opening lines of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) – is a feast for the senses from the start, with the 'rich odour of roses' inviting the reader through the door, away from the 'dim roar of London' to the orientalist fantasy within.¹ As in so many fin de siècle visual and literary texts, decadence is conveyed – or implied – through vivid descriptions of the material culture surrounding, or, as in this instance, carefully assembled by the central characters. At the heart of his description are 'long tussore-silk curtains' on which the 'fantastic shadows of birds of flight' produce 'a kind of momentary Japanese effect', an exotic invocation of the Asian-inspired Aestheticism to which Wilde subscribed in his own life.² He was perhaps the most well-known male proponent of Aesthetic Dress – most obviously performed through velvet suits with knickerbocker trousers he famously wore during his 1882 lecture tour of North America, where he was photographed by Napoléon Sarony (fig. 1). While Wilde's views and practices on dress met with mixed reviews, his escapades were widely reported and avidly followed in the British press, cultivating his celebrity even while abroad. Although he was mocked for his attire in Boston, his ensemble as reported by the Canadian press was more subdued:

The apostle had no lily, nor yet a sunflower. He wore a velvet jacket which seemed to be a good jacket. He has an ordinary neck tie and wore a linen collar about number eighteen on a neck half a dozen sizes smaller. His legs were in trousers, and his boots were apparently the product of New York art, judging by their pointed toes. His hair is the color of straw, slightly leonine, and when not looked after, goes climbing all over his features.³

Wilde was the high-profile, often lampooned example of what in artistic circles was a serious approach to art and life, from the furnishing of one's home, to one's sartorial choices. 'The Aesthetic Movement', as it is still often called, did not have a cohesive thesis or manifesto. For this reason, many scholars now prefer the term 'Aestheticism', which acknowledges the breadth of fields influenced by Aesthetic values, and its intersections with other contemporary movements and ideals – including decadence. While Aestheticism is often thought to be confined to the visual arts, unlike decadence which is primarily a literary tradition, both reflect a more eccentric and rebellious side of Victorian culture that crosses over multiple disciplines. They develop from similar cultural contexts and find inspiration in ideas of excess and pleasure, but equally they have more philosophical underpinnings that suggest more serious questions around the nature of beauty.



Fig. 1: Oscar Wilde photographed by Napoléon Sarony (1882). Photographic print on card mount, 33 x 19 cm.
Source: Wikimedia Commons.

The present issue of *Volupté* explores the connections between Aestheticism and decadence through the lens of fashion and textiles. The theme was inspired by a online series of talks (*Jendis*), ‘Decadence & Aestheticism: Truth, Beauty, Exoticism, and the Sublime in Nineteenth Century Fashion’, which we were invited to organize by the British Association of Decadence Studies (BADS) in Autumn 2021. Our own eagerness to explore these connections stemmed from a shared interest in Aestheticism in dress and textile histories, particularly in relation to the performative aspects of Artistic Dress, and its relationship to costume/fashion practice in life and on the stage. The papers shared at the four *Jendi* events highlighted the ways in which fashion and textiles – including objects such as clothing, costumes, and interior soft furnishings – can become narrative agents in literature, and within both historical and contemporary creative practice, including ‘neo’ and revivalist responses to these periods. We therefore wish to note (and thank again) the contributors who initiated these important conversations, some of whom are also represented in this issue:

Truth

Emily Taylor, ‘Material Constructions: Making, Outré and Taste in late-19th Century Dress’
Stefanie John, ‘Unveiling Truth and Beauty: Textiles in Sarah Grand’s Short Fiction’
Hilary Davidson, ‘Looking Back Through Fashion: Regency Romanticisms’

Beauty

Ailsa Boyd, ‘Some Americans in the “House Beautiful”: Edith Wharton and Wildean Aesthetics’
Max Donnelly, ‘Daniel Cottier and the House Beautiful’
Kimberly Wahl, ‘Decadent Beauty: Haptic Modes in Aesthetic Dress and Design’

Exoticism

Samuel Love, ‘Send in the Clowns: The Pierrot Costume as Decadent Cipher’
Louise Wenman-James, ‘“Oh, I didn’t know you were a Selfridgette!”: Power Play, Self-Construction, and Fashion in Ada Leverson’s *Bird of Paradise*’
Veronica Isaac, ‘Shopping in Byzantium: Costumes fit for a “Temple of Art”’

Sublime

Robyne Calvert, ‘Dark Decadence: The Gothic in Aestheticism and Neo-Aestheticism’
Rachael Grew, ‘Rags to Sequins: Dressing the Witch’
Catherine Spooner, ‘Unwrapping the Mummy’s Bandages: Whiteness, Fabric and Horror in Imperial Gothic Fictions’

These four *Jendi* evenings left us keen to initiate further discussions surrounding the centrality of dress and textiles within both decadence and Aestheticism, and the interrelationship between individuals and their values. We were therefore delighted to accept an invitation to edit this special issue of *Volupté*, which engages with debates and ideas connected to the opulence and splendour of Aestheticism, and also its darker decadent side.

What we have compiled is an exploratory issue, applying approaches from material culture to a literary field and thereby offering interdisciplinary considerations which include not just astute textual analyses, but creative pieces of fiction, poetry, and art practice as well. This collection encompasses a range of sources, disciplines and time periods representing texts, textiles, film, images, interiors, dress, and accessories – real and imagined. The creative responses in particular demonstrate that both Aestheticism and decadence – or neo-decadence and neo-Aestheticism – are living fields that provide inspiration for creativity, questioning, and analysis. The exploration of fashion in relation to decadence is nascent in terms of scholarship: amongst the most recent publications we recommend the excellent contribution by Catherine Spooner entitled ‘Fashion: Decadent Stylings’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence* edited by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (2021).

The first two critical essays in this edition directly discuss how Aestheticism and decadence manifest through dress and textiles in late Victorian fiction, focusing on the artistic side of the ‘Gilded Age’ in the work of two important women authors. In ‘Some Americans in the “House Beautiful”: Edith Wharton, Oscar Wilde, and Aestheticism’, Ailsa Boyd presents a consideration of aesthetic theories in the work of Edith Wharton (1862-1937), whose first published book was an interior design manual, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897). Following a concise overview of the transatlantic exchange of Aestheticism in the 1880s, Boyd discusses the influence of Pater and Wilde in Wharton’s fiction (Wharton may have seen Wilde lecture). She observes that while Wharton’s taste in her own home did not exhibit the decadence that Wilde indulged in, ‘Aestheticism gave Wharton a language with which to discuss beauty in her own writings’ (p. 1).

She offers rich examples of how this was employed, together with fascinating insights into how Aestheticist principles translated into the author's homes: 'Wharton decorated several homes according to the principles of her book, and built The Mount at Lenox, Massachusetts in 1902, probably exerting influence in the architectural design as well as the interior' (p. 18), thus providing an important and underappreciated example of a successful woman artist embodying the Aesthetic principle of blending art and life.

In 'Fibres, Folds, and Trimmings: The Decadent Materials of Sarah Grand's Emotional Moments', Stefanie John explores Aestheticism, decadence, and the New Woman in the short stories of Sarah Grand (1854-1943), particularly those published in the collection *Emotional Moments* (1908). John observes that within these stories, 'narrative appropriations of material culture accentuate Grand's subversion of gender norms and furthermore reveal her appropriation of Aesthetic and decadent culture.' (p. 30) In her shrewd analysis, John points to the ways in which Grand – like Wilde – uses textiles as a metaphor for atmosphere, and, by extension, aesthetic sensibilities. However, John also elucidates the ways in which Grand's work has the added complexity of using dress and textiles to comment on gender and power in what would now be deemed a feminist critique; showing how Grand's stories both partake in and parody aestheticism and decadence.

Laura Alice Chapot's contribution, 'Layers of Clothing Layers of Clothing in Hjalmar Söderberg's Writing: Translations of "The Fur Coat" (1898) and "A Grey Waistcoat or Justice in Munich" (1913)', directs the attention of decadence studies to late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Sweden. Both decadence and fashion are, as Chapot shows, taken seriously in author, translator, and journalist Hjalmar Söderberg's (1869-1941) work. The two short stories on which Chapot's analysis centres are distinguished by a meticulous attention to detail in the description of the clothing, with an incisive focus on specific elements of dress – the colour of a coat, the number of buttons – and the socially and culturally specific information they communicated about their wearer. Building on this point, Chapot argues that 'In this rapidly changing social landscape,

fashionable dress became a way of situating oneself socially. It became a code through which individuals could make themselves readable and interpretable.’ (p. 53) Like Söderberg’s writing, Chapot’s article is a testament to the power and significance of clothing - specifically its enduring ability - ‘like decadence itself’ to ‘mean many different things simultaneously.’ (p. 57)

In his article ‘Rag Time: Decadent Textiles in the Louisiana Gothic of the Fin de Siècle’, Ryan Atticus Doherty takes us on a journey to late nineteenth-century Louisiana which, he argues, has been underexplored in terms of decadence. Doherty analyses the use of textiles to reflect the sense of decay in the deep South after the Civil War, providing metaphorical fabric for Louisianian authors such as Adolphe du Quesnay (1839-1901), Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), George Washington Cable (1844-1925), and Alfred Mercier (1816-1894) to ‘grappl[e] with the concept of decadence in the American South’s postbellum years’. (p. 76) Doherty proposes Southern decadence should be reconsidered within a broader framework of the historic and cultural confluence of European colonialism, the Caribbean, and the American South, to allow for a re-evaluation of this unique literary genre. Like Chapot, Doherty presents an intriguing analysis that shows the malleability of cloth and clothing to signify multiple connotations around class, race, power, and place, especially in the case of fashionable New Orleans.

The final two essays expose and engage with the darker side of decadence through clothing and textiles as cyphers for excess, extravagance, conceit, artifact, deception, corruption, and even violence. In ‘Finishing Touches: Clothing and Accessories as Tokens of Evil in Rachilde and Barbey d’Aurevilly’, Elise Bouley argues that ‘the sartorial realm [is] the perfect location from which to read the decadent woman as an idol of beauty and perversity.’ (p. 103) Her exploration of the ‘cross-fertilization between appearance and cruelty’ (p. 102) centres on three short stories from Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly’s 1874 collection *Les Diaboliques* (‘Le Rideau Cramoisi’ [‘The Crimson Curtain’], ‘Le Plus Bel Amour de Don Juan’ [‘The Most Beautiful Love of Don Juan’], and ‘Le Bonheur dans le crime’ [‘Happiness in Crime’]), which she reads alongside, and in conversation with, Rachilde’s novel *La Marquise de Sade* (1887). In a piece which is unflinching and

troubling, Bouley engages with the darker elements of decadence. In her article, however, it is the women who are, quite literally, dressed to kill: their male victims both enraptured and emasculated by ensembles which herald, and in some instances directly initiate, doom and destruction.

Like Bouley, David Wingrove explores the darker side of decadence in '(Un)Dressing Decadence: Masquerade and Murder in *Mascara*'. Centring on a close reading of the 1987 film *Mascara*, directed by Patrick Conrad, Wingrove ventures into a world in which supreme beauty co-exists with, is tainted, and ultimately corrupted by, passion, violence, and murder. His article exposes the unease and potential anger provoked by the fear surrounding identities and garments which remain in flux and refuse to conform to stable social and cultural norms. Wingrove's piece makes a compelling case for the continued, and heightened relevance of the film given the current and growing unease and division provoked by 'culture wars' over gender identity and transgender rights, arguing that *Mascara* feels like 'a film whose time has come' (p. 138).

Adjacent to these critical pieces (and in addition to the *Jendi* talks noted above), Spooner has contributed to this issue a sublime short story, 'Arrangements in White and Red', which picks up on these themes in a wonderful Whistlerian way. Equally, Aubrey Beardsley has been literally and figuratively woven into both Azadeh Monzavi's textile work entitled *The Yellow Art Piece*, and Andrew Nightingale's poems, extracts from a sequence based on portraits of Marchesa Luisa Casati. Pre-Raphaelite art and the fiction of Lewis Carroll inspired *Otherscapes*, contemporary fashion photographs through the fantastical lens of Jade Starmore. Collaborating with designer Deniz Uster of Otherscapes Studio, and featuring model Rebecca Wyman, the images craft a contemporary faerie tale exploring the body's relationship with the natural world, decay, comfort, and ruination.

There are still many questions which this issue of *Volupté* does not address as fully as we would like. For example, we recognize the importance of the debates initiated by the previous issue on Decolonizing Decadence, and there is a great deal more work to be done in this area to deconstruct issues of gender, race, and class. We therefore offer this issue as more of a provocation,

rather than a reflection on the current ‘state of the field’. Our aim is to inspire and invite others to undertake further discussion and research on fashion and textiles in decadence studies, particularly as narrative agents that may reveal deeper complexities and new readings of material and literary culture of the fin de siècle, and their legacies.

¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 7.

² Ibid.

³ Walter Hamilton, *The Aesthetic Movement in England* (London: Reeves & Turner, 1882), pp. 120-21.