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Decorator and Disruptor**

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Modernism/modernity

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 15, Number 3, September 2008

pp. 527-545

10.1353/mod.0.0005

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:


**Aestheticism's Afterlife:
Wallace Stevens as Interior Decorator and Disruptor**

Elisabeth Oliver (bio)

In an early letter to his fiancée, Wallace Stevens refers to what he calls his “lady-like” habit of writing poems, describing his art as “trifling poesies . . . like the trifling designs one sees on fans.”¹ This comment has often been taken as proof of Stevens’ habit of self-deprecation and his anxiety around the legitimacy of his vocation as poet in a world of capitalist progress and profit. When Stevens likens his poetry to the “designs one sees on fans,” Frank Lentricchia argues in *Ariel and the Police* (1988), he is comparing his art to “an expendable item of luxury that ends up, like a fan, in the hands of leisured ladies.” “[W]orse yet,” Lentricchia continues, Stevens is saying his art is “not even a fan,”—an object of some practical use—“but a decoration on a fan.”² But consider this: what if Stevens’ comment were not simply an act of self-deprecation, what if it were a comment borne of false modesty? How does it change our assumptions about Stevens’ relationship to his art if we entertain the possibility that he was at once fretting *and* bragging about the association between his poetry and the art of fan painting? While there can be little doubt that the comparison he makes is self-deprecating, an undercurrent of self-aggrandizement exists in the comment as well. If we look back at the cultural moment from which this comment arises—at the wider cultural context in which Stevens cut his teeth as an artist—we can see that to have been a decorator of fans was something of which one might have been particularly proud. William Morris, James McNeill Whistler, Henri van de Velde, Camille Pissarro, Paul Gauguin, and Henri Matisse, among others, all applied their artistic talents to the production and decoration of domestic objects, including, though not **[End Page 527]** limited to, fans. By likening himself to a decorator of fans, Stevens situates himself in an estimable tradition of early modernist artist-decorators. More than simply a sign of Stevens’ insecurity, his comment reveals a sense of his self-admiration as an artist. As he compares his poetry to “the trifling designs one sees on fans,” Stevens assumes the role of the beautiful woman who, when complimented on the vintage gown that flatters her figure, answers, “What, this old thing?”

Stevens’ double-edged comment, torn between self-deprecation and self-compliment, does not exist in isolation. This example is one of

many in which modernist poets and their critics ambivalently compare modernist verse to objects and practices of decoration. Such ambivalence, however, has gotten lost in the history of modernist criticism. Whether admiringly or disparagingly, Stevens' verses have been likened to "bric-a-brac," "jewel boxes," and "literary curio[s]."³ His stylistic flourishes, one critic writes, have a "decorative elegance," while another claims that they fall short of attaining the glossy finish of rare Japanese lacquer.⁴ In her review of *Harmonium*, Marianne Moore writes admiringly of the way his poetry creates a "sense of proximity to . . . Chilcat blankets, hair seal needlework, [and] Singalese masks."⁵ Stevens was not the only poet whose work was described in terms of decoration: in 1916, H. D. compared Marianne Moore's poetry to the art of decoration in *The Egoist*, likening her verse to a delicately carved screen, wrought by a master craftsman, "meant to stand only in that serene palace of her own world of inspiration."⁶ This "frail" yet "hard" *objet d'art*, H. D. argues in the midst of the Great War, is "destined to endure longer, far longer than the toppling skyscrapers, and the world of shrapnel and machine-guns in which we live."⁷ Moore was elsewhere criticized precisely for the overwrought, decorative quality of her verse. In *A Symposium on Marianne Moore*, published in Harriet Monroe's *Poetry*, for example, Moore's poetry is criticized for being a "hard, deliberately patterned crust," "[b]rilliant at times to the point of gaudiness."⁸ Despite the dramatically different content and style of Mina Loy's poetry, her work is also...




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MODERNISM / modernity
VOLUME FIFTEEN, NUMBER
THREE, PP. 527–545.
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UNIVERSITY PRESS

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