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The Ambient Interior in the United States during the Long Nineteenth Century: Editor's Introduction

by Isabel L. Taube

This special summer issue explores how ambience, atmosphere, and spatial conditions affect meaning and enframe reception in interiors in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The articles herein emphasize environmental and sensorial interpretations over exclusively visual analyses. In doing so, they present built interiors—both commercial and domestic, existing and non-extant—as more than static receptacles for art and decorative objects but as dynamic spaces with ambiances that change throughout the course of the day. The authors transcend the typical methods for studying and presenting the interior. They do not limit themselves to unchanging, two-dimensional images and architectural plans but, with the aid of digital tools, they encourage us to rethink our understanding of interiors and the way they might have been experienced, perceived, and used by their historical owners and visitors.

The contents of this issue consist of three articles presented in chronological order: Julia B. Rosenbaum's study of the renowned landscape painter Frederic Edwin Church's Olana in Hudson, New York, designed by Church in collaboration with the US architect Calvert Vaux and constructed between 1870 and 1872; Lea Stephenson's exploration of the dining room in the King family's summer residence, Kingscote, in Newport, Rhode Island, designed by the US architectural firm McKim, Mead & White and completed in 1881; and Anne Helmreich, Edward Sterrett, and Sandra van Ginhoven's discussion of the Duveen Gallery at 720 Fifth Avenue in New York City, designed by French architect René Sergent and finished in 1912. The first two address homes belonging to their commissioners, unquestionably domestic spaces, whereas the final article focuses on a commercial space built as a gallery for the display and sale of fine and decorative arts but modeled on the domestic interiors of the Duveen Brothers' wealthy clientele. Each of these articles engages the central theme of ambience, its purposeful construction, and its cross-cultural character.

Ambience in the Long Nineteenth Century

While ambience is frequently mentioned in descriptions of interiors, it is often used broadly to acknowledge a desirable quality in an indoor space but rarely particularized. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ambience as "environment, surroundings; atmosphere, esp. of a pleasant or appealing nature."^[1] It is also a term frequently associated with "mood, character, or atmosphere of a particular place."^[2] Ambience in the positive sense is adopted by the authors here in their discussions of both the design and experience of interiors in which aesthetic and practical concerns comingle. However, the question remains: How was ambience created and by whom? Architects, designers, and owners, as demonstrated by these three articles, often worked collaboratively to arrive at desired effects, agreeable to both the mind and the senses, that varied depending on personal or professional aspirations and the location of the space. These articles also argue for the function of ambience in symbolic and experiential terms and on different scales: a room, a floor, or an entire building. A house, for example, might have rooms with varied ambiances depending on factors like its purpose and the character of the inhabitant(s), and even within a room, a cozy corner or an arrangement

might generate its own effects. Stephenson hones in on the Kingscote dining room as a multisensory space, designed and arranged to stimulate meaningful exchanges with objects and to advance the then current quest for educating the senses. Rosenbaum turns to Church's first-floor interiors in the main house at Olana, revealing how windows and wall colors created a dynamic and, at times disorienting, atmosphere out of the encounter between inside and outside, the real and the represented. Helmreich, Sterrett, and van Ginhoven focus on the interior of the Duveen Brothers' gallery to assess how its organization and circulatory pathways effected a pleasing and elevating ambience for "the casual observer and the dedicated collector." As suggested by these articles, every aspect of interior space, from its immovable structural elements like windows and walls to its color palette, acoustics, and contents, including art and decorative objects, contributed to its ambience(s). Location also played a role, as both Rosenbaum and Stephenson reveal; natural light and exterior views animated interior spaces in the country and were harnessed for their changing, atmospheric effects throughout the course of the day and during different seasons.

International Sources

A collaborative effort among well-traveled, cosmopolitan architects, designers, and owners familiar with current aesthetic tastes and trends produced the ambience in each of these interiors. These articles offer insight into how nineteenth-century interiors exemplify the individuality of their owners and designers and transcend national boundaries in their display of design strategies and objects sourced from a wide range of cultures and time periods. Isabel and Frederic Church found inspiration for the dynamic and porous inside/outside relationship in the main house at Olana in the light-filled, domestic architecture they observed on their travels in Beirut and Damascus. They then used the resulting natural light effects to generate "an ambient light show of sorts" across the surfaces of their eclectic collection of objects. Aesthetic-style interiors in England, Japanese and Islamic design strategies, and David King Jr.'s collection, including eighteenth-century objects from the colonial period in the United States and Chinese objects he inherited from family involved in trade with China, helped to create the multisensory atmosphere of the Kingscote dining room. The considered arrangement of each element ensured the pleasing and stimulating diversity of aural, haptic, and visual experiences in this space. In the case of the Duveen Brothers' gallery, the building itself has the hallmarks of French Beaux-Arts architecture, the residential architectural style favored by the gallery's clientele, and most of the merchandise was British or European in origin or style. Some of the display rooms were dedicated to particular national styles, echoing an approach to generating ambience guided by historical revivalism and themed décor associated with nineteenth-century French approaches to domestic interiors.

The Ambient Interior and Its Possibilities

Why study ambience in the interior? Rather than breaking the interior into parts and separating its architectural elements from its interior décor, usually linked to its moveable contents and their arrangement, ambience provides a meaningful framework for assessing how these aspects work together to generate meaning, whether symbolic or experiential. It asks us to consider how the holistic character of a space is cultivated, refined, appreciated, and even copied. Investigating ambience leads to not only environmental but also sensual

analyses that expand beyond the visual to consider other affectual and sensorial responses. Ambience also has a dynamic quality and accounts for change over short or long intervals of time. The challenge now is to uncover and trace it in the historical record. These authors have shared their findings and have opened up new avenues for interpreting interiors during the long nineteenth century.

Intention and Development

This publication is the first special summer issue with digital art history articles that the editors of *NCAW* have originated and guided from initial conception to finished projects. It is part of the series American Art History Digitally, sponsored by the Terra Foundation for American Art. The topic of the ambient interior was selected to align with the three main goals of the Terra grant: (1) contribute to scholarship on historical US art by advancing the Terra Foundation's mission of advancing transatlantic, cross-cultural connections; (2) provide an opportunity for art historians new to digital art history to publish exemplary, peer-reviewed work in *NCAW*; and (3) demonstrate to the field that digital art history is within everyone's reach by using open-source options whenever possible. The ambient interior lends itself particularly well to the use of technology and the digital format of *NCAW*. The articles include annotated and interactive floorplans and photographs, deep zoom images, and animations of changing light effects and of circulation pathways. In the hope that others will learn from this special issue, each article has a project narrative that details the digital technologies used and explains the choices that the authors made in selecting those tools. The digital components enabled the authors to engage with their subjects in ways not possible in print format, transforming usually static representations of spaces into spatial experiences in real time, offering a better understanding of the original impact of these interiors.

This special issue began with a call for proposals and a workshop in February 2019. After the workshop, my coeditors, Elizabeth Buhe and Petra Chu, and I worked closely with the selected authors to develop digital components and bring their initial proposals to fruition. Like so many projects, this one was delayed by a year due to the pandemic, which caused the closure of archival institutions and museums that housed necessary resources. We want to thank all of the authors for doing their best to realize their projects despite the challenging circumstances. We also want to express gratitude to the Terra Foundation for American Art, especially Amy Gunderson and Francesca Rose; our workshop participants; our anonymous peer reviewers; our copyeditor, Cara Jordan; and our web developer, Allan McLeod, who, in addition to his usual publication work, created the digital components for the articles by Julia Rosenbaum and Lea Stephenson. We hope that this special issue will inspire future scholarship on the interior and help scholars realize new approaches with digital components in their own work.

Isabel L. Taube teaches art history at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, and the School of Visual Arts, New York. She also is the executive editor of *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*. Her current book project focuses on the meaning and impact of eclecticism on nineteenth-century interiors and their representation. This study builds on her previous work on the US painters [William Merritt Chase](#) and [Walter Gay](#).

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[1] “Ambience, n.,” OED Online, Oxford University Press, December 2020, <https://www-oed-com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/> [login required].

[2] “Ambience, n.,” OED Online.