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exhibition review of

Candace Wheeler: The Art and Enterprise of American Design, 1875-1900

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"Candace Wheeler: The Art and Enterprise of American Design, 1875–1900"
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
10 October 2001–6 January 2002

Amelia Peck and Carol Irish

Candace Wheeler: The Art and Enterprise of American Design, 1875–1900

New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001
276 pp.; 86 color ills., 102 b/w ills.; index, bibliography; \$45.00 (hardcover)
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Candace Wheeler is one of the key figures in the multivalent decorative arts movement of the late nineteenth century. Designer, entrepreneur, and proselytizer, she was a profoundly middle-class person whose well-heeled siblings traded in groceries and cheese; unlike society women of the period, who dabbled in art and uplift, Wheeler made a remunerative career of textiles, embroidery, and interior design.

She was the founder and chief attraction of Onteora, a summer cottage colony in the Catskills for artists and intellectuals (Mark Twain was among the luminaries who adorned the Wheeler front porch). Onteora was within hailing distance of New York City, where Wheeler first partnered with Louis Comfort Tiffany and later became CEO of her own firm, Associated Artists. She was, of course, a woman—as well as wife and mother—and in her chosen profession this was an advantage of sorts; women were, after all, expected to tend to the household arts. But Wheeler was also a shrewd businesswoman, and she took some pains to promote the careers of the women who worked for and with her. Her daughter, Dora Wheeler Keith, and Dora's friends Ida Clark and Rosina Emmet were among the best-known "commercial" artists of their day. They were winners of the prestigious Louis Prang Christmas card competitions and designers of the famous American Tapestries—created to honor the famous women of American literature and lore using a needlewoven embroidery process created by Wheeler—that graced some of the most prestigious residences of the period.

This sumptuously illustrated volume, which accompanied the exhibition held at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, does justice both to Wheeler and to the milieu to which she belonged—a world in which pattern, texture, glint, nature, color, exoticism, and yards of cloth in one's surroundings—whether at home (for example, the salon of George Kemp, a pharmaceuticals manufacturer whose Fifth Avenue mansion was "done" by the firm of Tiffany & Wheeler) or in public venues (such as the Seventh Regiment Armory or the Women's Building at the 1893 Columbian Exposition)—spelled good taste. Mark Twain's residence in Hartford, Connecticut, the celebrated retreat of a major American celebrity, was another Wheeler project and worthy even today for the cover story of *Architectural Digest*.

The reader does not have to be a specialist in the decorative arts to welcome this book as a cornerstone in any well-appointed library on nineteenth-century American culture. Wheeler and her friends, relatives, collaborators, and clients managed to participate in what

scholars now regard as focal points in the social history of their times: the great world's fairs at Philadelphia and Chicago; the Sanitary Fairs of the Civil War era; the "millionaire society" of New York City in the Gilded Age; the doings of the "arty," cosmopolitan circle of painter William Merritt Chase; the mild Luddism of the American followers of William Morris, who lived nonetheless at the epicenter of a rising machine aesthetic; and the maturation of the drive for women's rights. Wheeler's work, epitomized in the American Tapestries, manages to weave most of these threads together upon the warp and weft of commerce.

Amelia Peck and Carol Irish have done admirable work in assembling what remains of Candace Wheeler's legacy. The bulk of the textiles illustrated here comes from a collection left to the Metropolitan by Dora Wheeler Keith. Sadly, because of the kind of silk thread used in their fabrication, many of the more spectacular pieces have deteriorated to the point of ruin; some museums, before examples of modern "craft" were considered fit subjects for attention, neglected even to try to restore some of Wheeler's tapestries before they were completely destroyed. As a pictorial archive of surviving pieces, then, the book is of enormous value. It is enhanced by the period photos showing lost interiors and scenes of the principals at work and play, as well as magazine illustrations demonstrating Candace Wheeler's status as a famous and respected American woman.

I first became involved with Wheeler's story in the 1970s, when I was drawn to the famous Chase portrait of Dora in the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art that shows her as a proud young artist in a studio setting, confident, twitchy, and very "artistic." But who was Dora Wheeler? Scraps of her biography led me to Candace, and to the suspicion that her career had somehow been overlooked because the decorative arts—and women—were deemed inconsequential in the great canonical saga of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture! So it is a special pleasure for me to see Candace Wheeler written back into the history of American art, at the very center of the ongoing debate about the relationship between art and Art, design and art, between the arts and business, industry, and commerce, and between the home and the gallery. Meticulously researched, inclusive of both history and art history, and beautifully presented, *Candace Wheeler: The Art and Enterprise of American Design, 1875–1900* is a stellar accomplishment.

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