

# The Parlor As a Temple of Art: Decadent Mise-En-Scenes

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*“Chambres pleines de songe!*

*Elles vivent vraiment*

*En de rêves plus beaux*

*que la vie ambiante.”*

*1915 G. Rodenbach*

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THESE IS a relationship of direct correspondence between decadent interiors and the interior of their inhabitant. In the case of decadent aesthetes, one might say that the abode represents the man himself, interior being equivalent here with interiority, an “image de l’âme” (Séverine Jouve). Consequently, there is an almost symbiotic relationship between the aesthete and his home, achieved through the abolition of exteriority and the orientation towards one’s own interiority. The absorption of the exterior by the interior, where it is reproduced according to a typically decadent artificial metabolism, is conducive to what Séverine Jouve calls “des maisons introverties.” “La décadence propose des maisons introverties, des demeures

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où seul l'aménagement intérieur semble s'imposer. On n'y trouve pas de description extérieure d'habitation."<sup>1</sup> This involves a complex system of correspondences, transfer procedures, reflection effects, which turn the decadent aesthete's home into an installation which corresponds to his own sensibility, a *mise-en-scène*. The interior is nothing but a narcissitic reflection of himself, embodied in a hermeneutics which befits the character, and it might simply stem from the ipsative projection which his own home creates.

The way in which writers and artists decorate their apartments becomes significant and it illustrates a defining element of the decadent aesthetics of rooms and of the meaning which these aesthetes project onto indwelling. An example would be L'Hôtel Goncourt in Auteuil, on Montmorency avenue, which Edmond de Goncourt evokes in one of his books, *Maison d'une artiste*, published in 1881, where he inventories an apartment. In the absence of a plot, the novel turns into a systematic succession from one room to the other, each room opening a different chapter in the *roman à tiroirs*: Vestibule, Salle à manger, Petit salon, Grand salon, Escalier, Cabinet de travail, Cabinet de toilette, Chambre à coucher, Cabinet de l'Extrême-Orient, Boudoir, Second étage, Jardin. The inventory of houses belonging to aesthetes is prodigious: the apartment of Guy de Maupassant, the houses of Jean Lorrain—the interior of one of the rooms being minutely described in the fantastic story called *Ophélius*—, some of the houses of the dandy Robert de Montesquiou Fezensac, described in detail in a book similar to Edmond de Goncourt's *Les Pas effacés* (1923), etc.

In his turn, Gabriele D'Annunzio decorates his house in a way which indicates that it was meant to serve as a temple to his own personality, as an eulogy to the emblematic poetry of the Italian nation. He also calls his "villa," which he begins to change in 1929, "Vittoriale degli Italiani," another "maison théâtrale," conceived in keeping with the spirit and sensibility of the inhabitant, just like the house of Moreau; hence, this house represented some sort of testamental and celebratory disposition of the writer who entrusts the future generations with an already memorable image of his genius.

The Romanian endeavour partly involved a museum-like quality; each object engaged the attention of the narrating curator, without implying a classification, but a qualification. Thus, its value becomes poetical, it stems not so much from the place which it occupies within a collection, but from its symbolic-aesthetic place in a superior order of the ensemble. One of the ideals of symbolists is that of the total work of art, and in this sense the object enters a network of correspondences. The narrator only speaks about an apparently reified self, about an intimate architecture of a self immolated in his own home. The decadent meaning of this immolation can be found in a grimly distorted form in Edgar Allan Poe's stories and especially in "The Fall of the House of Usher." Roderick Usher

is the last offspring of an aristocratic family, his decline is paralleled by that of his house, the double meaning of the title dissolving the ambiguity into a quasi-organic intimacy. The contiguity achieved through transient states of dissolution and melancholy rapture entails the substitution of interiority with the interior, with the House of Usher, in the sense of genealogically encompassing the family within the receptacle of the Ushers' home. The home is thus endowed with its own corporality through the habitational transfer of a sickly, grim sensitivity, so that the death of its last offspring leads to its downfall. In the case of Poe's short story, the osmosis between the house and its inhabitant is also realised through a mental disorder, the result of a burdensome heredity, whose epitome is the hypersensitive Usher. The whole microcosm comprised of the house proper, but also its closest neighbourhood, is imprinted with the sickly melancholy of the character. It's just as if his personality dilates and affectively irradiates a limited area which encloses the place in a bubble, where the atmosphere has a specific density. The character is isolated in an ipsative, neurotic limbo, where each object, each sound has its own morbidly accentuated acoustics. The patronymic unity is climactically re-established in the moment of the double destruction of the house and of its inhabitant, which implodes in the mortifying narcissism whose symbol is represented by the dark waters of the pond near the house, a pond that serves as a tomb both for the ruins and for the body of the wretched Usher.

Quite significant for the decadent universe is also this habitational complex which realises a transfer of personality, or even substance, between the inhabitant and the home. This is also what Walter Pater concludes, in accordance with Swedenborg's spiritualistic "philosophy": "The house in which she lives is for the orderly soul, which does not live on blindly before her, but is ever, out of her passing experiences, building and adorning the parts of a many roomed abode for herself, only an expansion of the body; as the body," according to the philosophy of Swedenborg, is but a process, an expansion, of the soul.<sup>2</sup> The house which Marius identifies with is not only inhabited, but actually alive, a speculative animism which induces a series of overlaps of feelings at the level of architecture, lighting, interior decorations etc, each element defining a residential personality. For such an orderly soul, as life proceeds, all sorts of delicate affinities establish themselves, between herself and the doors and passageways, the lights and shadows, of her outward dwelling-place, until she may seem incorporate with it—until at last, in the entire expressiveness of what is outward, there is for her, to speak properly, between outward and inward, no longer any distinction at all; and the light which creeps at a particular hour on a particular picture or space upon the wall, the scent of flowers in the air at a particular window, become to her not apprehended objects but powers of apprehension

and doorways to things beyond the germ or rudiment of certain new faculties, by which she, dimly yet surely, apprehends a matter lying beyond her actually attained capacities of spirit and sense.<sup>3</sup>

The extraverted model of the parlor, a space of interaction and spiritual manifestations *par excellence*, which even requires interactive vocation and training for this purpose, is replaced by the solipsistic model of the temple of art, encompassed within the sphere of intimacy. In the opinion of Gottfried Friedl, who analyses Gustav Klimt's painting in the context of *fin de siècle* Vienna, everything contributes to the creation of the private space "atmosphere," psycho-aesthetically suited for the inhabitant. This almost symbiotic relationship also has an escapist implication, typical for the arts, but also a narcissistic projection of the self onto an aesthetic dimension. "The interior design and general artistic appearance of people's living space were of central importance for art around the year 1900. One's living space was seen as an area of privacy where a person could withdraw from the life of society and which was reserved for the undisturbed development of one's psychological sphere. 'Atmosphere,' the unity of psychological and aesthetical well-being, was one of the key concepts characterizing the requirements of interior design at the time."<sup>4</sup>

This configuration of the sphere of intimacy and of modern rooms, with their harmonious consensus between all components and their integration within the whole of "atmosphere," is representative for the Secession movement, Gottfried Friedl believes. "Rooms, series of rooms and indeed whole villas could be subjected to a uniform artistic concept in which all the details were in harmony with one another, so that sometimes even the clothes of the inhabitants were subject to the uniform design of the whole."<sup>5</sup>

Interiors are given a new representation and a psychology of their own, in harmony with those of the inhabitant. Sometimes this personality reveals its unique imprint and inspires a special frame of mind to the inhabitant. In his poetry volume *Règne du silence* (1891), in the part entitled "La Vie des chambres," Georges Rodenbach presents his animistic vision on interiors:

*Les chambres, qu'on croirait d'inanimés décors,  
—Apparat de silence aux étoffes inertes—  
Ont cependant une âme, une vie aussi certes,  
Une voix close aux influences du dehors  
Qui répand leur pensée en halos de sourdines. . .  
. . . Chambres pleines de songe! Elles vivent vraiment  
En de rêves plus beaux que la vie ambiante.<sup>6</sup>*

The French symbolist painter Gustave Moreau organizes his museum house according to the same principle, which involves integrating one's own personality in the previously arranged house, meant to play the role of an *alter ego*. The painter undertook minute adaptations and arrangements of the home in order to give it the desired usage, the selection and array of paintings being made with the purpose of "une orchestration de la vision du public sur l'intimité de son travail qu'il procédait, concevant d'ailleurs son musée selon un système de double présentation, la majorité de salles abritant l'œuvre à proprement parler, tandis que quelques pièces étaient dévolues aux souvenirs biographiques et rappelaient la fonction initiale du bâtiment en tant que lieu de travail et de vie."<sup>77</sup> In fact, this double destination creates a synthesis of biography and aesthetics, with the two recommending each other, whereas the museum house of Moreau, transformed while he was still living there, highlighted its double meaning. In the museum one can find the real home of the painter. Rodolphe Rapetti emphasizes the meaning of this final dwelling, which is that of organizing the house, as the decadent aesthetes did, like a theater stage, where the paintings are characters and the director is always discretely hiding behind the curtain. "Moreau vécut par conséquent plusieurs années dans l'édifice de sa commémoration posthume et dans la théâtralisation de son œuvre entier en course d'achèvement, en quelque sort dans un espace qui représentait littéralement un prolongement de son corps et de son esprit."<sup>78</sup>

The decadent home is generative of anxiety, and the multiplication of suggestions, sensations and reflections in a room meant to accentuate their echo can become stifling; in this sense, the excessive *Art Nouveau* decorations which Des Esseintes, Georges Charles Huysmans's character in *Against the Grain*, uses to decorate the tortoise shell produce a similar effect upon the inhabitant of such an environment: devitalization and even death. The decadent aesthete subjects himself to the same risk, that of transforming not only the home but his very self into a museum piece. Actually, such a densely aesthetic environment requires perfectly adapted organisms to populate it. Exceeded by his own aesthetic artifices, Des Esseintes proposes a series of escapes, of scenic openings of this space towards the horizon of daydream. Such mise-en-scenes are realised through a series of aesthetic grafts, level disruptions. Des Esseintes evokes the ascetic dimension of a hermitage, artificially arranged in the middle of the temple of art, or endows his home with the artificial lung of a greenhouse filled with exotic plants. The monastic seclusion, the tropical jungle, the smoky tavern or the cabin on a sloop can become the object of a refined scenography. However, the transplant is not enough, even if the grafted organ is integrated within the metabolic order of the aesthete who doesn't tolerate nature in its pure state.

Passing from one home to another means changing the artistic temper for a writer like Jean Lorrain, associated with decadence. *Le Courrier Français* dedicates a special number to Jean Lorrain, “so little known in our country, or, to be specific, so badly and falsely known.” The *Seara* (Evening) newspaper of April 1911 reproduces Jules Bois’s article from the French magazine, about the dandy-writer and the interiors of his home. The article is relevant for the relationship which the aesthete has with his own home, its change brings about a change of “countenance” and personality. With regard to Jean Lorrain, the French critic suggests the therapeutic effect of changing the museum house, the decadent environment, with a less artistically-charged one, without relinquishing the common element of both spaces: seclusion. From the “bachelor asylum” of Botticelli, Watteau, Burne-Jones and Moreau, created in “soapy style” and keeping the gory, stucco head as a relic on Herodiade’s platter, the advancement is not enough, but quite impressive, suggesting an aesthetic convalescence. “Lorrain had changed his countenance by changing his home. Rested and tender, with his almost tranquil eyes, he no longer looked like the once pale, thin, crushed man, who seemed to be coming out of a terrible trance.”<sup>99</sup> The writer displays his credo, which is art, and his passion for art acquires a mystical nuance, enough to stir his anxiety. Art requires a culturally informed love and a devotion turned into aestheticizing mysticism. Sensations, which are important for any kind of literary sensuality, are related to the sickly, reflected in the way in which aesthetes decorate their parlors in order to maintain both the cure and the poison, or, in the sense which Jacques Derrida ascribes to the term, the decadent *pharmakon*.

**I**CHOSE TO illustrate the way in which literature and art are recovered in the space which artists inhabit through three distinct personalities: the poet Alexandru Macedonski, known as the founder of the symbolist school in Romanian literature and the mentor of a poetry circle, Alexandru Bogdan-Pitești, patron of the fine arts, also one of the most important art collectors at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the painter Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck, who was among the few women accepted in The Young Artists society for her remarkable talent. The three emblematic personalities for the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century illustrate a vision on the role which art and literature play in circumscribing a specific space.

The interior of Macedonski’s home is decorated similarly to a pagan temple of art, where the master takes his aesthetic priesthood seriously and celebrates the cult of poetry with the elevation of a priest. Religiousness is projected upon art, the interior being meant to underscore the initiatory journey and the monastic character of the art object, turned into an object of veneration. A red candle is permanently lit, like the sacred fire never extinguished in the temple of Hestia. Dante’s mask marks this journey, Khnopff had a mask of Hypnos, and



Félicien Champsaur possessed a platter with the head of John the Baptist, who was beheaded upon Salome's demand. Blood evokes a sacrificial act and maybe Macedonski considers himself a sublime sacrificer on the altar of art. What is interesting is that Adrian Marino, in the biography dedicated to the poet, presents the writer's parlor, with the aid of a character-*raisonneur*, the novice who is taken through the rooms in order to be initiated into the mysteries. Thus, the esoteric meaning of some objects is revealed as part of the initiating rite, and the interior scene is remade through the contribution of eye witnesses, Ion Valerian, M. Celarianu, Flamin Chesaru, N. Davidescu or Cora Irineu.

*But the true creator of these pieces is the poet himself, because it is according to his directions that the furniture was made. The genesis and signification of the throne plates is only known by the initiated. From a distance, their vague, hazy lines represented confused, hermetic figures for the ignorant. Upon seeing that he was overwhelmed by uncertainty, even perplexity, the master would politely ask him:*

*"Do you know what it is?"*

*"?!"*

*"It's Thalassa burning on the shore."<sup>10</sup>*

Fumigations are also present, and the stucco mask of Dante is accompanied by the bronze bust of the poet, the work of E. Storck. The throne is quite inspiring, it is the central furniture piece which serves in the poetic ceremony. The throne was made according to the poet's directions, just like the entire furniture, and one might say that it reflects his own vision on the interior of the temple-parlor. The meaning of the throne's composition is only communicated to the initiated or it is revealed to the novice, already bedazzled by so many hues. The entire house is conceived by an aesthete and it respects the internal laws of a superior harmony, and of art in general. In such an environment, Macedonski celebrates the cult of art, more specifically that of poetry, with a loftiness which stands above the ridicule of grand maxims. Macedonski entertains the cult of art in a decadent spirit which euphemizes a cruel act, a bloody ritual, which the dim red light or the different elements of identical colors, as well as the "vitalist" explanation of the sacrificer allude to. One can find here an exacerbated macabre effect, meant to confer upon the meetings something of the suspense and theatricality of a dark table. Anyway, the ministrant of mysteries wants absolute adoration, like a pagan divinity who receives sacrifices. The mask of Dante opens for the novice the possibility of an initiatory journey through the Inferno, towards Paradise, in the excelsior of poetry. The parlor maintains the ambiguity of a liminal space where the two apparently irreconcilable worlds meet, offering a climactic vision which the throne invests with the power of an infallible judgment. Visi-

tors are “judged” according to the requirements of poetry, the divinity in the name of which Macedonski hosts these aesthetic ceremonies. The end of the first initiation stage ends with the revelation of one of the mysteries, the meaning of the throne and the whole decorative ensemble which consecrates it, and, as in all revelations, the explanation does not exhaust the meaning, but gives it back its true dimension.

One of the most important Romanian critics of that time, G. Călinescu, describes the sumptuous room of the throne, the parlor also called “The Macabre Room,” just like the members of Macedonski’s court are ironically dubbed “macabronzi.” Călinescu is a fine artist of interiors, a talent which he practiced in his novels as well. The critic and novelist registers the effect of the lofty-macabre atmosphere through the plethora of cushions, as well as the attention given to details which are meant to simulate a setting of occult ceremony or a Byzantine court in the place where Macedonski’s poetry circle was supposed to meet. Luxury, fine materials, precious stones have to do with an aesthetic royalty which the Poet recommends from the height of his throne. Poetry is an aristocratic crowning of aesthetic qualities. The nocturnal cycle of meetings, as if they were medieval incantations, also possesses a liturgical quality; the poet celebrates an aesthetic ritual, disengages from the profane space in order to be introduced into a sacred dimension, that of poetry. All of the surrounding props, as well as the aesthetic ceremony involve contact with absolute beauty, with poetry turned into a kind of sacred, disguised as profane, an ecstatic state. Rare materials and luxury are meant to suggest, while the imitations of precious stones really succeed in creating a royal condition, Macedonski’s *Excelsior*. “A special throne,” “the master’s chair,” designed and painted by his son Alexis, with the three symbolical steps of glory, awaits the Poet. On the table, candles are burning, and a nocturnal, almost permanent, crown council of Poetry is in session. The ill-intended call the parlor “The Macabre Room,” and the disciples “macabronzi.” Macedonski reads verses in a sepulchral, enshrouding voice and makes enthusiastic praises, giving away rings adorned with false stones.<sup>11</sup>

A series of painters like Fernand Khnopff or Franz von Stuck make their own space, just like Des Esseintes, Huysmans’s famous character will do. For the painter of a decadent sensibility, *la maison c’est l’homme même*. The interior reflects and is reflected in the artist’s soul. We can find an important decadent dimension in the way painters, writer or art collectors choose to decorate their house interior if not build it. One of the themes of Huysmans’s novel *Against the Grain* (1884) is this relationship which the character has with his own abode, transferring that which tackles the desirable exterior, the journey, or the temporary desire of ascetic isolation, the hermitage, within his own house, which is able to withstand the desired metamorphosis. Des Esseintes is constantly deco-



rating his Fontenay abode, not only by adding new things to his art collections, but also by placing them in a unique taste, pointing out new harmonies, peculiar to the rhythms of his own sensibility. One of the chambers becomes a ship's interior, with all the necessary accessories, and by doing so the aesthete travels by staying put in the space open to all possibilities, helped by imagination and all his aesthetically lined senses. From choosing the books, the tapestry, the colors, the fabrics, the perfumes, to the evanescent splendors fated to fill a neurotic sensibility, there is no place for chance. Even when the decadent aesthete plays the card of austerity, recomposing the monastic astringency of a hermit's cell with all the litotes' virtues, the remarkable usage of the void is employed with good taste by foregrounding the details, the apparently innocent details, the ones that produce the expected effect in the case of dandy aesthetics.

Theatricality depicted as the artificializing of its own locative space, it transforms it into a scene where the decadent producer improvises his little sumptuous performances. The objects are chosen because of their property to evoke, their usage does not imply museums, but fiction, placed in the same order of fiction together with Edgar Allan Poe's novel, but also standard engravings of certain maritime companies, which are part of another interior.

**G**ENERALLY SPEAKING, the decadent aesthetes' houses become art collections or libraries, as in the case of Alexandru Bogdan-Pitești, a poet and important patron of the fine arts. In this case that there is no special place for the two articulation points of the decadent habitat. "L'itinéraire de l'esthète dans la maison passe inévitablement par la bibliothèque et le cabinet aux estampes."<sup>12</sup> In the case of Alexandru Bogdan-Pitești, the house is decorated based on the aesthete's taste and maybe it is the subtle way in which the decadent signor's substance is reintegrated, recomposed. That which at first sight appears to be a used artistic *bric-à-brac* actually reveals a meticulous maintenance of contrasts, but also a harmony highlighted by an ecumenical aesthetics. Theodor Enescu<sup>13</sup> makes a reconstruction of the collection of Alexandru Bogdan-Pitești. Unfortunately the collection was dismantled and the element of cohesion which structured it got lost. The catalogue gathers works of important and unimportant artists of his time, without suggesting the collector's decisive preference for a certain aesthetic trend, in spite of his symbolist-decadent sensibility. In art, the elements of the master's Catholic sensibility are disintegrated to also make way for the Orthodox objects and for the oriental crafts. The office of Bogdan-Pitești is the man himself, claims the narrator from Ion Vinea's novel *Lunatecii* (The lunatics). The writer, still a symbolist when he frequented the artist's house, left in the novel the description of his office. "Indeed, Alexandru Lăpușneanu's office resembled him greatly: paintings by Romanian artists, mixed with engravings

and earlier drawings by Pascin and Derain; old rusty statues of Byzantine emperors, with a cloak on the shoulders and a crown on the head, next to Brancusi; erotic postcards together with old collections of magazines; the classics mixed with the romantics and the symbolists—and then, carpets from Oltenia with clumsy arabesques, bukharae, Karamanii, Arabian saddles made for camels, candlesticks and crosses harrowed in wood by peasant craftsmen.”<sup>14</sup>

The art gallery-office of Bogdan-Pitești shows a museum-like reflex, but the “museum’s” owner is not interested in classifications or the typical operations which a museum imposes on the arrangement on its exhibits. The aesthete maintains his salon like a mystery cabinet, which accommodates not only important pieces, of a certain aesthetic value, but also erotic illustrations which cover the bathroom, in order to create a hedonistic atmosphere of the master’s aesthetic *jouissance*. Even the religious objects are deprived of their liturgical, sacral function, in order to be aesthetically reinvested. The only religion to which the aesthete clings is that of art. The collector has discovered a superior order, a secret harmony of all the pieces he possesses, and this order also represents the formula of his own self.

Like the Belgian symbolist Fernand Khnopff, who entrusts his vision to an architect—the house being made after his plans in 1900 and signed with his golden monogram—Frederick Storck together with his wife, Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck, worked together with the architect Alexandre Clavel to build the house on Vasile Alecsandri Street, between 1911 and 1913. We can draw a parallel not between the two architectural types, but between the two ways of dealing with the living space as a representation of their own artistic genius. The painter makes the secret pact between the higher divinity of the house and the motto which hermetically inscribes the entire ensemble. Unlike the Macedonskian parlor which has an oriental atmosphere with flavoured, flabbinesses of difficult stanzas and mysterious luminescence, a foggy atmosphere because of the opium smoke, the interior of the Khnopff villa has a certain astringency of a Greek temple, in which one can conveniently find decorative elements belonging to Japanese art and a way to confine the space “à la japonaise.” An eloquent description of this space is made by Günter Metken.

*Le sol de son grand atelier est couvert d'une mosaïque blanche, avec fontaine et bassin. Contre le mur s'élève le fameux autel à Hypnos. Le dieu du sommeil, divinité tutélaire de la maison, est placé dans l'axe du corridor, donc visible partout. Il sourmonte une vitrine signée Tiffany avec une fois de plus la devise de l'artiste: "On n'a que soi." C'est la demeure de Narcisse. Deux cercles en bronze désignent l'un sa constellation, l'autre le lieu d'inspiration.*

*Les parois paraissent minces et coulissantes à la japonaise. Des rideaux peuvent cacher les ouvertures. Les tableaux sont accrochés comme pour une exposition temporaire. Tout est léger, calme et d'une simplicité raffinée: la broderie japonaise et ces quelques motifs stylisés sont disposés au plafond ou couvrent la partie haute de l'atelier.<sup>15</sup>*

The blue chamber, the white chamber, the antechamber, a “logette” also in white marble where the head of the god Hypnos lies, compose a space like a big resonance box, despite the modest dimensions of the house, a space characterized by that *amor vacui* of the style of *Arts and Crafts* movement, characteristic of modernism. Günter Metken defines this space in a direct relation with the indweller, a relation based on an inextricable ambiguity: “C’est une architecture essentiellement introvertie dont l’unique occupant constitue à la fois le maître et le prisonnier.”<sup>16</sup> The portrait of his sister, Margueritte (1887), displayed in the blue room, represents the other higher divinity of Khnopff’s temple. The guest is shown into the interior of the villa through some successive landings which suggest a gradation of the assimilation of a different reality through some initiations in which the removal of any domestic object plays its role. There is nothing on which you can sit. The sanctuary-atelier is not a space where one can live or rest. The atelier’s floor is covered with white mosaic and, as in the Storck villa, there is a basin and a fountain near the wall, when you enter from the studio, in front of which there is a bronze of Franz von Stuck on a dado, entitled *Amazone au combat*. The revealing source of this simplistic, refined architecture could be the construction of Glückert I House in Darmstadt in 1900 built by the Austrian architect Joseph Maria Olbrich, claims Günter Metken. There is a special relation between the exterior decorations for the dome of the Secession hall and the ornamental frieze of the atelier and the decorative motifs of the blue chamber’s ceiling. Beyond these influences which stand testimony to the emergence of some aesthetic visions towards the end of the century, the Khnopff villa stands as a representation of the Self, a self-portrait of the artist at an architectonic scale.

Regarding the Storck villa, beyond the house’s architecture itself or the interior decorations, there is a way of making an almost symbiotic relationship between its interior and its own internalness. According to the decadent sensibility the garden transforms into a greenhouse, its artificial correspondent, an exotic horticultural place grafted in the middle of the abode. Usually, the aesthete’s houses become some sort of microclimates for the greenhouse plants incarnated by its inhabitants. Symbolist-decadent artists often build through art or after their own taste an interior which will ensure their privacy and reflect their obsessions, the artistic identity and secrets.

For the Storck villa, the center of gravity is the central room which is placed at the ground floor, namely the atelier. The house relieves through an interesting combination of colors, the fences are painted in Pompeian red, reminding us of the Mediterranean area, a possible influence of the “grécisante et polychromée” villa of Franz von Stuck, which the two artists had the chance to visit in Munich. At the same time, the house’s model is Anglo-Norman, in Tudor style with exterior poles. A series of small metopes, fragments of bass relief or frieze are also present. The ones in the back of the house were added later and are part of the Kalinderu collection. The archway of the main entrance is decorated with grapes and grape vine in a perfectly balanced arrangement, whilst the capitals decorations of the two colonnades which “sustain” the archway are zoomorphic and phytomorphic. One of the first seals of the building is the “epitaph” (Liliana Vârban) near the entrance: “This house was built between 1912 and 1913, the architect being Clavel and the owners and collaborators were Frederick Storck, sculptor, and his wife Cecilia, painter.” Underneath there is a plaque in Renaissance style showing a possible doom and in one corner of the building a small Masonic seal.

Liliana Vârban offers an interpretation consonant with the decadent art which gives the art the reserved place of religious sensibility. This interpretation is backed up by the presence, both in its interior and exterior, of several elements with religious significance, refunctionalised decoratively and also symbolically in the abode of the two. “According to the spouses Frederick and Cecilia’s vision, the creation place corresponds to a monastery where art is consecrated as a deity, and they are the priests and the servants. Evidence of this interpretation is the ‘EPITAPH’ next to the entrance. The text carved in stone is backed and also protected by two angels. The main entrance to the ateliers which nowadays serve as exhibition rooms is decorated with a grape vine which symbolizes the tree of life from the religious iconography.”<sup>17</sup>

The house also has some sort of shrine, which consists of a stone fountain with a Byzantine touch combined with the Renaissance style. As we have seen, Fernand Khnopff’s house also has one, and also Stuck’s villa, where the painter puts one of his famous paintings from the *Sin* cycle. Stuck’s shrine has all the requirements of a decadent *mise-en-scène*, where the sacred is invoked for a dark mass. “The painting in the Villa Stuck with its gilded aedicular frame was part of what has been called an ‘artist’s altar.’”<sup>18</sup> Behind the shrine, as it is suggested by the painting, the women who are about to serve him as models get naked. The shrine evokes a heathen cult having as a priestess a *femme fatale*, a decadent Eve, who undertakes phallic attributes, but also expresses a challenge for the Christian shrine, through this typically decadent method *à l’envers* where the praise to the Saviour’s sacrifice is replaced with a eulogy of sensuality and sin

reflected in the double symbol of temptation: the woman and the snake. For Stuck this may have been a source of amusement, art being full of a series of provocative licenses, projecting sinful desires in a seduction, pleasure and death scenario. Henriette Vâth notices the symbolic impact of this decadent inversion symbolically orchestrated by Stuck. “Although Sin occupied the position of a Christian altar panel there, at the same time it formed the center of a temple front, sacred site of ancient Greek veneration. However, the practical context in which the entire tableau stood permits one to draw conclusions about the (artist’s) unconcerned, trivial, and playful handling of ‘sanctified’ forms and motifs from tradition: The structure concealed a changing-room for models.”<sup>19</sup> As she revealed in her memoirs, Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck had visited Stuck’s house and also Lenbach’s “and in their luxurious and elegant ateliers I became aware of the Munich’s artists lifestyle.”<sup>20</sup>

The central part of the ground floor, the hallway, becomes a greenhouse, a painted rainforest. Serafina Brukner noticed not only the tropics and an atmosphere of a maximum spatial opening towards the South Seas and the Pacific islands, but also that this painted greenhouse represents the artist’s debut in decorative painting. So, Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck takes this first step by designing a place which is both cozy and protected by feminine figures with hieratic attitudes, and also through its openness to a foggy island, the laurels of a utopian ideal. The hallway represents the entrance into the painter’s atelier, art being the seclusion place where femininity reasserts herself almost entirely, following the growth of plants and the meanings of paradise. Unlike the luxuriant vegetation painted on the ceiling of the hallway, in the two rooms, the atelier transforms into an art temple, where each effigy becomes emblematic: “We further notice the walls inhabited by effigies which depict the heroes of the great spiritual epic, each silhouette depicting a shade of the inner life, a moment experienced by the human being. . . . We are talking about a series of allegoric paintings, in which the art of painting seems doubled by the vision of a poet.”<sup>21</sup> Each of these effigies engages in a rich inner life, each of these effigies represent a *mise en abîme* of the artist’s interiority.

The house has a separate garden, but this hallway with its painted ceiling corresponds to the painter’s aestheticizing intimacy, based on the annihilation of the relationship between interior and exterior. The tropical vegetation is transplanted not in a greenhouse which reenacts on a smaller size an exotic corner like in the case of Des Esseintes, but by transposing it in a color and thus becoming part of the house. “La première recherche de ces ‘naturalistes déçus’ est ornementale: il s’agit de donner à l’intérieur une illusion de l’extérieur. L’installation et la pétrification d’une végétation factice au sein de la demeure va dans le sens d’une réhabilitation de la nature, mais cette fois repensée dans un cadre choisi.”<sup>22</sup>

The nature's rehabilitation is responsible for its change, as an offcut strictly re-functionalized out of context. In this case, the decadent taste corresponds to the artificial and to the mystification, to the theatrical organization of the intrusion of nature. *Natura naturans* is not really permitted to enter the house, this nature transforms into an artifice, into an effect, after the rules of a decadent scenography. Des Esseintes makes a harsh selection, choosing only those tropical plants which suggest a breach in the kingdom, or the counterfeit, the artificial, plants which imitate the animal kingdom or more accurately a series of organs, the most important being the genital organs. The decadent aesthete rejects all which is charming, natural and healthy, the confusion of the kingdoms being highlighted by the plants' capability of suggesting sexually-transmitted diseases. Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck uses another "transplanting" method which does not fit Des Esseintes's morbid obsession. The distance from the referent is bigger when nature serves as a model, but here nature refers to a spatially remote nature, the luxuriant nature of the tropics. Thus, the artist creates a sort of "greenhouse effect," a "chambre végétale" in the middle of her own home, operating an initiating horizon, towards an exotic space filled with remoteness and enigmas, which is present in her art as well. The theatricality of the locative space actually corresponds to relinquishing the criteria of authenticity in favour of a new meaning given to mimesis, through the systematic erasure of the relationship with the referent, which is conducive to self-reflection. The model should not be searched for in nature, the decadent rooms corresponds to fiction, it is bookish and counterfeit, it develops a show whose sole character is the background and whose sole director is the lonely aesthete. The decadent "maison théâtrale" can also offer different plays, it benefits from stage mobility, it can be used for playing another show, as Séverine Jouve points out:

*Cette demeure se présente comme un théâtre, un espace où la distinction entre le vrai et le faux est dépassée, où les critères de l'authentique et de l'apocryphe ne sont plus que l'enjeu secondaire d'une représentation permanente. Univers de spectacle dont le décor, faisant disparaître la vie derrière l'apparence, est scrupuleusement mis en place. La maison fin de siècle est une scène, une pièce impossible, composée de trois murs et ouverte sur une espace blanc—celui du spectateur. L'esthète solitaire, personnage d'art, jouit spirituellement de la matérialité du décor—inutile et luxueux—qui masque un arrière-plan de néant: celui de la vie contemporaine. Il organise son spectacle intérieur pour lui seul. Ayant conquis le territoire des apparences, l'âme décadente contemple ses propres émotions dans le miroir du décor, trompe-l'œil psychologique autant qu'artistique. Et puisque la demeure est une scène, ne doit-elle pas avoir recours au répertoire de la comédie, à tous les moyens de l'art dramatique?<sup>23</sup>*



A French visitor, Léon Thévenin, who also wrote the first monograph of the painter's work also describes in a sensitive manner the impact which this painter greenhouse has upon him. "Le plafond du salon représente un entrelacement de feuillages d'un art exquis, où des oiseaux, pareils à ceux de l'art persan, jettent l'éclat et la variété de leur colorations. Sur les panneaux, de fines et rêveuses jeunes filles se dressent comme de grandes fleurs le long des murailles qu'elle decorent. . . . Elles sont elles-mêmes de beaux fruits de chair, éclos sous un climat doux, pour enchanter les jeux d'un monde plus délicat et plus civilisé que le nôtre."<sup>24</sup>

The French critique focuses upon this "greenhouse effect," the confusion of kingdoms, the deliberate contamination of human bodies by the slowness and flexibility of vegetation. These women's bodies turn into flowers, fruit, stems, the plants of a magic greenhouse, that benefit from a tender, tropical climate. In the critic's opinion this is also produced by the lack of a symbolic or allegoric vectorialization of the gestures of these girls; they tend to melt down into the foliage, they risk a narcissistic metamorphosis, they are flowers made of erotic meat, because Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck's greenhouse becomes feminized, turning into a metaphor of femininity released into art.

Between the three cases analyzed above there is the same connector, a decadent, fin-de-siècle sensibility which allows the recovery of ipsative fictions so as to aesthetically decorate their own homes as temples of art or *maisons théâtrales*. □

## Notes

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4. Gottfried Fliedl, *Gustav Klimt (1862–1918): The World in Female Form* (Cologne: Taschen, 1997), 43.
5. *Ibid.*, 43, 46.
6. Georges Rodenbach, *Règne du silence* (Paris: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1891), 3, 4.
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8. *Ibid.*, 199.
9. "Opera lui Jean Lorrain," *Seara* (Bucharest) 2, 442 (Tuesday, 5 April 1911): 1.
10. Adrian Marino, *Viața lui Alexandru Macedonski* (Bucharest: Ed. pentru Literatură, 1966), 348, 349.
11. G. Călinescu, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1988), 517.

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16. Ibid., 43.
17. Liliana Vârban, Ionel Ioniță, and Dan Vasiliu, *Casa Storck* (Bucharest: Muzeul Storck, Muzeul Municipiului, 2005), 11.
18. Henriette Văth, "Zur Instrumentalisierung Stuckscher Bildideen in der Reklame um die Jahrhundertwende: Odolphommeage à Stuck," quoted in Gudrun Körner, "Sin and Innocence," in *Kingdom of the Soul: Symbolist Art in Germany 1870–1920*, eds. Ingrid Ehrhardt and Simon Reynolds (Munich–London–New York: Prestel, 2000), 157.
19. Ibid.
20. Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck, *Fresca unei vieți* (Bucharest: Bucovina I. E. Torouțiu, 1944), 84.
21. Serafina Brukner, *Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck* (Bucharest: Anima, 1992), 21.
22. Jouve, 91.
23. Ibid., 93.
24. Léon Thévenin, *Cécile Coutesco-Storck: Sa vie et son œuvre* (Paris: Éditions des Quatre Chemins, 1932), 19.

## Abstract

### The Parlor As a Temple of Art: Decadent Mise-En-Scenes

The interest in decadentism at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which this work emphasizes, also conveys a significant encounter between the inner self of the artist and the shell which covers it. The artist is not only what he writes, paints, carves or composes, but also his reflection in the mirror of his own house. The way he/she chose to built it, to decorate it, to live in it corresponds to a sophisticated scenario whose director acts as a priest officiating mass, a priest whose religion is art. Three different personalities, the symbolist poet and one of the first to theorize the modern literature, the leader of the symbolist movement at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Alexandru Macedonski, the writer, Mecena and famous art collector, Alexandru Bogdan-Pitești, and the painter Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck illustrate the profound link between art and dwelling as an aesthetic manifesto. An aesthetic perspective on dwelling and living also becomes the theoretic frame for a restatement of the relationship between nature and culture, between individual and social etc.

## Keywords

decadentism, symbolist art, modern literature, Alexandru Macedonski, Alexandru Bogdan-Pitești, Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck, aesthetic manifestos