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## **Elsie de Wolfe: A Professional Interior Decorator**

The (mostly) recent work undertaken to date on early twentieth-century female interior decorators – Eleanor McMillen, Nancy Lancaster, Sister Parish, Elsie de Wolfe, Dorothy Draper, Nancy McClelland, Syrie Maugham, Rose Cumming and others - has emphasized their exceptional biographies.<sup>i</sup> Indeed, the very size and glossy nature of many of the publications highlight the individual, celebrity nature of the decorators in question. It was through their determination, strength of character and often flamboyant personalities, these publications suggest, that they transformed what had hitherto been seen as an unpaid amateur feminine activity – the decoration of the home – into a modern career for women.

Indeed, the fact that so many of the lady decorators focused on the home is made much of in several of the studies. In the foreword to the book about their mother and grandmother by Sister Parish, Apple Bartlett and Susan Crater, for example, Albert Hadley stressed that, “The beauty and harmony of her surroundings were expressed with conviction and clarity in the environments she helped to create for others. At the core were all the elements of refined taste, but taste flavored by a sometimes wicked wit and a degree of jovial irreverence that possibly explains the magic of her creative genius – her genius for the art of living, the art of home.”<sup>ii</sup> Only May’s article on McClelland points out that that particular decorator contributed to the profession of interior decoration in a more institutional manner by becoming the first woman to be the national president of the American Institute of Interior Decorators. Mostly, the other publications are more interested in the lives, the styles and the individuality of their colourful subjects.

This focus on individual feminine achievement has been at the expense, perhaps, of an account of a history of interior decoration/design that might have placed more emphasis on the development of professionalization through the roles of generic structures, such as

educational and professional organisations and institutions. In other contexts, these are often cited as the catalysts of profession formation, especially in the neighbouring fields of architecture and graphic design. In her study, *Origins of Graphic Design in America*, for example, Ellen Mazur Thomson stated that the professional status of graphic designers was achieved through “education, self-imposed standards and [the formation of] professional gate-keeping organizations.”<sup>iii</sup> Although individual designers are also dealt with in Thomson’s study, the role of institutions in defining and overseeing standards is seen as core.

The so-called amateur backgrounds of many of the lady decorator; their (for the most part) seeming lack of interest in the development of formal interior design education; and their (again, for the most part) apparent lack of attention to shared professional standards and regulations, has tended to create a binary divide in scholarship in the field of interior decoration/design history. That divide separates the activities of the decorators from the story of the evolution of the profession of interior design as it developed through the twentieth century. It is a divide that has gender difference at its core and it partly derives from the fact that, in the years after 1945, a number of neo-modernist, male interior designers and apologists accused de Wolfe and her entourage of holding back the interior design profession because of their commitment to historical styles. Robsjohn-Gibbings, for example, wrote in his book, *Goodbye Mr Chippendale*, “Decoratively speaking, American women live in the shadow of Elsie de Wolfe and if it was the Chicago World’s Fair that held American architecture back fifty years, it was she who did the same thing for American furniture design”.<sup>iv</sup> His vitriolic attack on de Wolfe derived from his essentially modernist positioning, that is he abhorred historicism and was anxious about the role that taste played in the decoration of the domestic sphere. Taking their lead from architects Robsjohn-Gibbings, and others, preferred the taste-free (or so they believed) world of the public sphere.

That masculine point of view was already manifesting itself earlier on in the century, however. Frank Alvah Parsons, a male apologist for interior decoration, was a contemporary of de Wolfe's. He was undoubtedly aware of her work and not impressed by the way that female decorator's projects were closely linked to the social aspirations of many of her clients. In 1915 Parsons, who created one of the first educational programs in interior design in the US, published his book, *Interior Decoration: Its Principles and Practice*. In it he wrote, in stark opposition to de Wolfe's idea that the home is a feminine sphere, that, "The house is but the externalized man: himself expressed in colour, form, line and texture".<sup>v</sup> He went on to argue against the use of "feeling" in making aesthetic decisions, and of historical styles, at least as he saw them being used. "The periods, too" he wrote, "have been treated as strange and incomprehensible, too deep and mysterious for anything but unquestionable admiration and slavish copy".<sup>vi</sup>

In this chapter I would like to suggest that, where the formation of the profession is concerned, the divide between individualistic feminine interior decoration and collective masculine interior design is a false construct, and that, in spite of their historicist preferences where the styles of the interiors they created were concerned, de Wolfe, along with several of her contemporaries and followers, was as fully engaged in forming and defining a new profession as was Parsons by setting up his educational program. Although the lady decorators may not have been responsible for putting in place the educational and regulatory institutions that set and oversaw the standards expected of the profession, they intuitively, I believe, established many of the commercially-oriented practices and strategies that underpinned interior decoration and design through the twentieth century, and which continue to do so to this day.

De Wolfe's assumption was that decorators acquired knowledge about their clients and the market through working with them and that the best way of learning how best to promote

their activities to others in a world in which the media through which that information was disseminated was constantly changing, was to engage in practice. Also, given the important client orientation of, and the role of taste in the practice of interior decoration, a number of broadly-based skills and bodies of knowledge could only be acquired in the working environment, especially those relating to the concepts of life-style and fashion, and to the practices of marketing and advertising linked to changing definitions of the concept of the brand.

One of the reasons why we link de Wolfe with amateur, rather than professional, interior decoration is that she came to our notice through the publication of her 1913 book, *a House in Good Taste*.<sup>vii</sup> Inasmuch as it targeted amateur practitioners that tome (falsely) presented its author as a quasi-amateur herself. Just as Hadley claims for Sister Parish later, having unquestioningly bought the self-presentation that that decorator offered to the world, de Wolfe presented herself as a private individual with innate taste who could offer it to others, especially in the all-important (where social status was concerned) arena of the home. This was little more than a subtle marketing ploy, however, which positioned her as someone who could offer people the taste that they didn't necessarily have themselves.

Many of her clients were second-generation *nouveaux riches* – the William H. Crockers, for example, for whom she designed the interior of their home, *New Place*, in Burlingame, California, made their money through banking and the railroad, while J. Ogden Armour, for whose family she worked on the interiors of *Mellody Hall* in Lake Forest, Illinois, was in the meatpacking business.<sup>viii</sup> Both families wanted to be able to present themselves as tasteful and the elegant eighteenth-century interiors that de Wolfe provided them with what was needed to do that.

Throughout *The House in Good Taste* de Wolfe emphasized the schemes she had developed for her own homes, from the one on East 17<sup>th</sup> Street in New York, to her residence on East 55<sup>th</sup> Street in the same city, to her French home in Versailles. The decorator turned her own life and life-style into a commodity that was highly attractive to the clientèle with whom she sought to work. It was a marketing strategy that remained in place through the twentieth century where selling goods for the home was concerned, brought to the fore in the 1960s through the British retailer Terence Conran, through his Habitat store. *The House in Good Taste* was published at the point at which de Wolfe's career had really taken off and the book sold in very large numbers. It undoubtedly served to bring her the notice of large numbers of people and assist her in her career. The fact that she went to the lengths of employing a ghost-writer for it – Ruby Ross Goodnow (later the decorator Ruby Ross Wood) - suggests its importance for her as a commercial strategy.

In spite of her lack of a formal education and non-adherence to a professional body, in this essay I want to suggest that de Wolfe contributed to and reinforced a number of commercial strategies that have helped shape the working practices of the modern interior design profession. She was not necessarily the first, or indeed unique, in developing them but she was notable for being quick to borrow models established in adjacent areas and adapting them for her own purposes.

Before she even became a decorator, De Wolfe's first career as a paid actress on the Broadway stage at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for instance, provided her with a set of skills that were directly transferable to the newly-emerging activity of interior decoration. Above all it taught her how to promote herself through the media. Several articles about the actress in her own home appeared in New York magazines, such as *Town Topics*, in the 1890s. The writer, Margherita Arlina Hamm, also commented in her book, *Eminent Actors in the Their Homes*, about de Wolfe's East 17<sup>th</sup> Street home, that “No

neighbourhood is more appropriate as the home of a famous actress”.<sup>ix</sup> She continued to use the printed mass media as a form of self-promotion. She first published *The House in Good Taste*, as instalments in *The Delineator* and the *Ladies Home Journal*, popular women’s magazines, aware that this was a hugely effective form of advertising the work of her new office. Her marketing strategy was thought through from the outset. As well as involving herself with the media she sent out a card with an image of a wolf on it, a distinctive visual branding exercise that she used for many years.

De Wolfe was also clearly aware of the importance of networking. The first paid projects she was involved with were commissions from people she knew from her theatre days. She quickly expanded that circle when she took on the project of working with Stanford White on the interiors of Colony Club in New York, an all-woman’s club the membership of which came from across the US. So well publicised was her work on the club’s interiors that many of its members (including Ethel Crocker and Lolita Ogden Armour) commissioned work from her. De Wolfe had met White through Sunday afternoon open house sessions that she and her partner, Elizabeth Marbury held regularly at their home on East 17<sup>th</sup> Street, a networking event that proved extremely professionally beneficial for the aspiring interior decorator.

Another of de Wolfe’s professional/personal contacts was Condé Nast who owned *Vogue* magazine, which was published at first in the US, but soon afterwards in Paris and London. De Wolfe was a regular in its pages over several decades. Not only did the magazine report on her decorating achievements it also noted her dress and her entertaining – in fact, her whole life-style. Their marketing strategies were finely attuned as Nast claimed that he wanted *Vogue* to appeal to people “whose criterion was taste rather than mass popularity”.<sup>x</sup> In 1924 the decorator refurbished Nast’s apartment on Park Avenue.<sup>xi</sup>

De Wolfe's commercial strategies – networking, marketing and branding among them – were undoubtedly developed intuitively as she had a strongly entrepreneurial side to her character and she clearly followed her nose rather than a textbook. When *The House in Good Taste* finally appeared it contained, as its frontispiece, an image of de Wolfe leaning against the mantelpiece of her own home in East 17<sup>th</sup> Street. The fact that the decorator's hand-written name was added confirmed her self-identification as an early “signature designer,” a phenomenon that came to the fore in the USA in the 1930s and, again, in Europe in the 1980s. Although that marketing strategy had been used earlier by the pioneering couturier, Charles Frederick Worth, who had added his name to his garments, de Wolfe was the first to employ it as a decorator.<sup>xii</sup>

Indeed, de Wolfe owed a great deal to the growing couture industry that was establishing itself in Paris just before the rise of the interior decorator. She had had direct contact with it when she was working on the stage. In the era before catwalk shows, it was actresses on the stage who had worn couture gowns and de Wolfe, with her slim figure had been an ideal clothes horse. She had worn gowns designed by Worth, Jacques Doucet and Jeanne Paquin among others.<sup>xiii</sup> In performing that role she would undoubtedly become aware of the sophisticated promotion and marketing strategies utilised by the new, highly aggressive fashion industry and would have unconsciously absorbed them. When the need came for her to promote her own business she most probably drew on that knowledge. It also reinforced her understanding of interior decoration as a lifestyle business.

The branding of oneself as a means of selling a creative individual's identity and celebrity as a guarantee of taste (seen in this context as a commodity in the commercial marketplace) became a key element within the marketing strategies employed by designers working across a range of specialisms through the twentieth century. Fashion designers, such as Worth, borrowed the idea of the creative individual from nineteenth-century Romantic art. In the



process they characterised their own work as an art form, which gave it added value. The practice remained part of the world of haute couture through the twentieth century, and until very recently, with couturiers such as Coco Chanel, Yves Saint-Laurent, Christian Dior and latterly Giorgio Armani, among many others, depending on the same strategy<sup>xiv</sup>. From fashion it moved into interior decoration and on into the worlds of graphic design, industrial design and architecture. By the 1930s the product designer, Raymond Loewy, had become a creative celebrity par excellence, featured, among other places, on the front cover of *Time* magazine. Half a century later the French industrial designer, Philippe Starck was to promote himself as a celebrity in a similar way, even to the extent of appearing on a television series.

By the 1930s the decorator had extended the reach of the “Elsie de Wolfe” brand, offering herself as a model of good taste and of a modern lifestyle by, like Loewy, endorsing a wide range of products, from cigarettes to carpets. While Loewy designed the all-white Lucky Strike cigarette pack, de Wolfe’s advertisement for the brand, clearly aimed at women, played on the slimness of her own body. The advertisement showed her – described as a noted interior decorator - clothed in an elegant couture gown and pearls, and the text read, “I recommend a Lucky in place of a sweet. Toasting has taken out every bit of harshness in the Lucky Strike tobacco. All that remains is the splendid Lucky flavour – an excellent substitute when your appetite craves a sweet but your figure must be considered”. (Fig. 1) In an advertisement for Gulistan carpets, de Wolfe (now Lady Mendl), was described as an “internationally famous actress, hostess and decorator”.<sup>xv</sup> The female audience was told that it also could become successful hostesses. “What pleasures will be yours when your guests see *your* room” the text explained. (Fig. 2)

As the twentieth century progressed de Wolfe’s decorating operation grew in size. In 1910 a newspaper article explained that, “she now keeps fourteen [staff] busy all the time and she has so many demands on her time that she finds it absolutely impossible to accept more than

half the contracts that are offered to her”.<sup>xvi</sup> By 1914, it was claimed, she had expanded her business significantly and was earning more than any of the lawyers in New York.<sup>xvii</sup>

From working from her own home in East 17<sup>th</sup> Street, in 1906 de Wolfe moved to her first office at 4 West 40<sup>th</sup> Street, where she supplied both interiors and *objets d’art*. Nine years later, at the height of her success, she moved again, this time to 2 West 47<sup>th</sup> Street, where she installed, on one floor, what she described as a mixture of salons, offices and studios, carefully decorated for visits from clients. A second floor was dedicated to workshops, staffed by a team of craftspeople who were employed to fabricate reproduction furniture items and the props needed for her interiors. They also made the curtains and other soft furnishings for her ongoing projects.

The idea of bringing production and sales into a single location was also taken from the couturiers. They in turn has taken it from early factories engaged in the manufacture of consumer goods, such as sewing machines, which, back in the mid-nineteenth-century, had opened showrooms adjacent to their manufacturing plants, thereby bringing selling into the environment of production. Even before that the model had been used in the mass production furniture industry which had implemented it from the early nineteenth century. The main reason was efficiency but it also meant that it was easier to have control over everything that went on. In her showroom de Wolfe could show her clients the kind of items they could include in their interiors.

The decorator described her West 47<sup>th</sup> Street premises as the “Elsie de Wolfe Studio” in order to downplay the commercialism of her activity and to emphasise her links with artistic practice and the consequent tastefulness of her offer to clients. Couturiers were doing the same. Indeed, it is a model of practice that has continued up to the present in the creative industries, interior decoration and design included. In 1921, after she had made Paris her

personal base, de Wolfe took on a whole floor of the new six-storey Cammeyer Building at 677 Fifth Avenue where her premises expanded yet again due to the quantity of commissions coming her way. She explained that the showroom there looked more like a private house than a shop, which suggested that she believed that the best way to sell interior decoration was to immerse people in simulated spaces that made them feel at home. The idea of placing the goods she had for sale in cases and on pedestals in emulation of a museum setting was not, for de Wolfe, the right approach.

While de Wolfe borrowed several of her marketing strategies from fashion design she also took ideas from the early advertising industry, in particular that of the creative office. In the second half of the nineteenth century the advertising industry had developed in the US as a means of ensuring that the goods produced by manufacturing industry reached consumers. Although manufacturers could sell customers their first sewing machine or automobile by bringing them to the factory, it was harder to make a repeat sale that way. Advertising agencies filled the gap, stimulating consumer desire. J. Walter Thompson was an example of a large advertising agency that was established in New York back in 1864 (originally with the name of Carlton and Smith). By 1902 it was working with Unilever to sell that company's goods through magazine and newspaper advertisements. Thompson pioneered the employment of "creatives", in his case of artists and writers, who worked alongside all the other employees needed to make the agency function.

It was a model that appealed to de Wolfe inasmuch as she needed to combine creativity with a range of other activities, through from promotion to finance to project management. She was operating at a significant scale and therefore needed to model her practice on companies of a similar size. Although the language used to describe what we now call the "creative and cultural industries" did not fully emerge until the 1990s, the model was established nearly a century earlier. As Justin O'Connor (2011) has written of the creative

and cultural industries, “individual artistic practice had to be set within a wide range of professional, managerial and commercial services”.<sup>xviii</sup> The same could be said of de Wolfe’s operation a hundred years before that.

Although she sold herself as a lone creative individual, or artist, De Wolfe needed the support of many employees, both creative and otherwise, in order to be able to deliver her decorating service. Regrettably the de Wolfe office’s business records have been destroyed, and very little is actually known about her day-to-day business practices. However, we learn from the individual projects that she undertook that Paul Chalfin, later the decorator of Viscaya, James Deering’s mansion in Miami<sup>xix</sup>, worked as an assistant to de Wolfe in 1910; that a Miss Butler was her assistant when she worked on Henry Clay Frick’s house in New York<sup>xx</sup>; that an Elena Bachman and an H. Joan Hofford were assistants to the decorator when she worked on a project for Nell Pruyn Cunningham in the 1920s<sup>xxi</sup>; and that a Josephine Kneissel was her finance manager in 1915. This information, albeit fragmented, suggests that she was hugely dependent upon a large number of direct employees, both administrative and creative, to ensure the smooth running of her operation. In addition, we know that she also worked with subcontractors on a project by project basis. Among was the artist Everett Shinn, later to become a member of the Ashcan school of painting, who she employed to create eighteenth-century decorations for the Colony Club.<sup>xxii</sup> De Wolfe worked with Shinn again on a painting for a dressing table that was used in the Jay P. Graves’ residence in Spokane and yet again in the Frick residence.<sup>xxiv</sup> This kind of work clearly provided an income over many years for Shinn while he was developing his own artistic career.

Following on the heels of the already well-established profession of architecture, and in response to the twin needs of mass production and mass consumption, the new creative industries – advertising, fashion design, graphic design, interior decoration and industrial design - were all expanding in the US in the early years of the twentieth century and

developing into modern creative professions and commercial operations. There were significant interdependencies, overlaps and borrowing between them in the early days. When, for example, in the late 1920s, the industrial designer, Walter Dorwin Teague, set up his large independent office in New York, he modelled his operation on that of the advertising agency in which they had undertaken their own apprenticeships. Teague, a trained illustrator at New York's Art Students' League, had worked for the advertising firm of Calkins and Holden, providing decorative borders for the documents they created for clients.<sup>xxv</sup>

Unlike the advertisers and the industrial designers, however, de Wolfe was not selling her creative skills to manufacturing industry but rather, in a direct sales context, to architects to whom she supplied antiques and objets d'art, and with (mostly female) clients who commissioned her to decorate their entire interiors. Where the former was concerned the decorator collaborated with numerous architects over her long career. They included Stanford White, with whom she worked on the Colony Club<sup>xxvi</sup>; Ogden Codman, whom she collaborated with on the design of a show house on East 71<sup>st</sup> Street in New York ; Arthur Heun, the architect with whom she worked on Melody Farm<sup>xxviii</sup>; Bigelow and Wadsworth, with whom she collaborated on Nell Pruyn Cunningham's residence in Glen Falls, New York<sup>xxix</sup>; Little and Browne, the architects who designed Suffolk House for the Warren Lanes in St. James, New York<sup>xxx</sup>; and Carrère and Hastings, who built the Frick residence on East 70<sup>th</sup> Street in New York.<sup>xxxi</sup> Each collaboration had a character of its own inasmuch as sometimes she worked closely with architects, as she did with Stanford White before his untimely death, and sometimes she simply supplied them with furnishings. Whatever the nature of the collaboration it was a very important aspect of de Wolfe's business when she was working on new buildings. Indeed, it remains a key part of most interior decorators'/designers' practices in the early twenty-first century.

Above all, though, de Wolfe developed direct relationships with the clients who commissioned decorative schemes from her. Where that (most important) part of her business practice was concerned she borrowed selling strategies from late nineteenth-century couturiers, among them Worth, John Redfern, Jeanne Paquin, Jacques Doucet and others - who sold dresses to women in studios that resembled domestic interiors. Indeed, their operations became known as “fashion houses”. Clearly, it was felt that women were more likely to make a purchase if they felt at home while they were trying on dresses and looking in mirrors to see whether different models suited them or otherwise. The relaxed atmosphere undoubtedly had an impact on sales.

De Wolfe borrowed another of her commercial strategies from the World’s Fairs where the idea of the use of complete model domestic interiors for commercial purpose had originated in the last decades of the nineteenth century. By 1900 it had become an important way of exhibiting furniture, as exemplified by the rooms created by Eugène Gaillard, George de Feure and others that were displayed at the Paris Exposition Universelle of that year.<sup>xxxii</sup> German and Austrian designers also created rooms at the same event. De Wolfe clearly understood the impact of the model room and, when she created her showroom at West 47<sup>th</sup> Street, she included one in it. While the other rooms in that venue were rather messy amalgams of furniture pieces displayed as in a warehouse, the little model room that she created brought together a regency striped chair, a boxy sofa, a patterned Louis XVI chair and Chinese wallpaper into a setting that looked as if someone could move into it immediately. Five years earlier, in 1910, the decorator had created a complete show-house at 131 East 71<sup>st</sup> Street in New York with the architect-decorator, Ogden Codman, that was full of model rooms. Not only did she furnish the entire house right down to the ceramic ornaments on the mantelpieces and pictures on the walls, and opened it to the public, she

generated even more publicity from it by holding a reception there on the opening night, which was reported widely in the press.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

The dependence on the simulated domestic interior as a sales setting not only distinguished De Wolfe's studio from the more production-oriented showrooms of the factories but also from those of the art and antique dealers who were expanding at that time with the fashion for historical interiors, especially in the French Styles. De Wolfe worked closely with art dealers and with the antiques trade. From the early days of her decorating career she travelled frequently to France, buying antiques and importing them back for her clients. Sometimes she shopped with them, as was the case with Henry Clay Frick in 1914 with whom she travelled to London and Paris, visiting, among others, the retail outlets of Lenygon and Morant, Frank Partridge and Charles of London in the former, and those of Arnold Seligman, Doucet, Mathelin and Jansen in the latter.

The art and antique dealers were also in the business of creating interiors for clients in the early twentieth century. However, they put less emphasis, than did de Wolfe, on the use of private domestic settings. The 720 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue showrooms of the Duveen brothers, prominent New York-based dealers in antiques from the 1860s onwards, for example, contained stands, pedestals, vitrines and showcases. This suggests that they exhibited furnishings and decorative artefacts as if they were being displayed in a public museum, thereby aiming to enhance their value in the eyes of the visitors who came to purchase them.

Large-scale upholstering companies also provided clients with complete interiors in the early years of the twentieth century. Indeed, before the emergence of the lady decorators, firms such as those of Herter brothers, and of George Platt and A. C. Palmer, among several others, had provided complete decorating services.<sup>xxxv</sup> The Herter brothers had been originally committed to the vertical combination of manufacturing and marketing in one

building model described above, and, from 1855 onwards, had housed their manufacturing and marketing in a single building. They separated them over time, however, eventually taking on an enormous building on Ladies Mile in New York. The first-floor showroom in that building was described as a “museum containing over 400,000 articles”.<sup>xxxvi</sup> The spirit of mass production remained pervasive, however, and the model of the public sphere of the museum, rather than that of the private home, prevailed.

The other venue in which customers could purchase an interior decorating service in early twentieth-century USA was the department store, the most important new form of retail outlet to be developed in the second half of the nineteenth century. There were strong connections between the fashion trade, world exhibitions and department stores. The department store window was, for example, one of the main ways in which the general public encountered fashionable dress, while at the Paris 1900 exhibition the department store, Bon Marché displayed its fashion wares on live models. By the end of the nineteenth century a commercial nexus had emerged that served to bring fashion items and consumer goods more broadly to the attention of the general public.

De Wolfe was very conscious of the opportunities that that nexus provided her with and she cleverly inserted interior decoration into the mix. Her clientèle remained one that was socially above that which frequented department stores, however. When those stores began to offer decorating services it helped her indirectly, though, as it defined her clients more clearly as not being department store customers. At the same time de Wolfe was always on the lookout for new clients who were rising (as she had done herself) through the social classes so her marketing was as wide ranging as it could be, especially in the latter decades of her career. The fact that the clientèle for department store interiors were from a social class below the one that sought interiors from de Wolfe, though, explained her closer allegiance to the couturiers who sought to provide a more élite, customised product.



In spite of de Wolfe's absence from that level of the market, borrowing from the French model that had been developed through the second half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century in stores such Le Bon Marché and Le Printemps, American department stores began to offer interior decorating services in the early twentieth century – Wanamakers in New York in particular - under the directorship of Nancy McClelland from 1912. McClelland, as Bridget May has shown us, unlike de Wolfe, was a life-long advocate of education and professional standards, including licensing, for decorators. In 1914 she was joined by Ruby Ross Goodnow (later Ruby Ross Wood) who, as has already been mentioned, ghost-wrote de Wolfe's *The House in Good Taste*.

Although de Wolfe herself worked independently, focusing on the commercial aspects of the developing practice of interior decoration, but presenting herself to her potential clientèle as a quasi-amateur, professional interior decorating groups were forming around her, aided and abetted by the lady decorator movement that she had helped to form. The Decorators' Club, for example, was founded in 1914 in New York by a group of women who set out to promote high standards for interior design education and establish rules for professional practice. In that year thirty-eight members met at the home of decorator Gertrude Gheen Robinson who, like de Wolfe, had begun her professional career as an actress and who delivered her operation in a very similar way. The Club was the precursor of the American Institute of Interior Decorators, formed in 1931, which, when merged in 1974 with the National Society of Interior Designers (formed earlier in 1957), became the American Society of Interior Designers.

This suggests that, rather than there being a divide between them, there was direct continuity between the so-called amateur ladies and the fully formed interior design profession of the second half of the twentieth century. I would like to suggest, although she was personally disinclined to become part of professional groups, that de Wolfe's early understanding of that

profession as a modern commercial activity, combined with her ability to learn from practices that were developing in parallel to her own, played a significant part in defining the *modus operandum* of the interior design profession when it finally emerged in the years after the Second World War. Her understanding of promotion, marketing, branding and the use of social networks were developed to a high level and she established those practices as being part of the professional practice of interior decoration and subsequently of interior design. Above all, she understood how, in order to be able to acquire clients, a creative service industry that focused on the decoration of the home had to embrace feminine culture and all that that brought with it. At the same time, however, it had to be run as a hard-headed modern business utilising all the commercial strategies available to a modern businesswoman.

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<sup>i</sup> See Brown, E. (1982) *Sixty Years of Interior Design: The World of McMillen* (New York: Viking Press); Becker, R. (1996) *Nancy Lancaster: Her Life, Her World, Her Art* (New York: Knopf; Bartlett); A. P. & Crater, S. B, *Sister: The Life of Legendary American Interior Decorator, Mrs. Henry Parish II* (New York: St. Martin's Press); Sparke, P. (2005) *Elsie de Wolfe: The Birth of Modern Interior Decoration* (New York: Acanthus); Varney, C. (2006) *In the Pink: Dorothy Draper: America's Most Fabulous Decorator* (New York: Pointed Leaf Press); May, B. (2008) 'Nancy Vincent McClelland (1877 – 1950): Professionalizing Interior Decoration in the early Twentieth Century' *Journal of Design History* 21 (1); Metcalf, P. (2010) *Syrie Maugham: Staging the Glamorous Interior* (New York: Acanthus); and Simpson, J. H. (2012) *Rose Cumming: With an Introduction by Albert Hadley* (New York: Rizzoli International Publishers).

<sup>ii</sup> Bartlett & Crater 2000, xvii.

<sup>iii</sup> Thomson, E. M. (1997) *The Origins of Graphic Design in America, 1870-1920* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 27.

<sup>iv</sup> Robsjohn-Gibbings, T. H. quoted in Sparke 2005, 23.

<sup>v</sup> Parsons, F. A. (1915) *Interior Decoration: Its Principles and Practice* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company), vii.

<sup>vi</sup> Parsons 1915, viii.

<sup>vii</sup> De Wolfe, E. (1913) *The House in Good Taste* (New York: Century Publications).

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viii Sparke 2005, 47-57 and 67-79.

ix Hamm, M. A. (1902) *Eminent Actors in their Homes: Personal Descriptions and Interviews* (New York: James Pott & Company), 56.

x Chase, E. W. and Chase, I. (1954) *Always in Vogue* (London: Gollantz), 55.

xi Sparke 2005, 229 – 237.

xiii Sparke 2005, 126.

xiv See Potvin, J. (2013) *Giorgio Armani: Empire of the Senses* (London and New York: Ashgate)

xv Elsie de Wolfe advertisement for Lucky Strike cigarettes in *Ladies' Home Journal*, May 1934, 17.

xvi Robinson-Locke Collection of Theatre Scrapbooks (1914) series 3, vol. 373, (New York Public Library), 18.

xvii Ibid.

xviii O'Connor, J. (2011) 'The Cultural and Creative Industries: A Critical History' *Ekonomiaz* no.73 (3); 4, available in translation online at:

[https://www.academia.edu/4147550/The\\_Cultural\\_and\\_Creative\\_Industries\\_A\\_Critical\\_History\\_3](https://www.academia.edu/4147550/The_Cultural_and_Creative_Industries_A_Critical_History_3). (accessed 04.04.2016)

xix Sparke 2005, 322.

xx Sparke 2005, 167 – 179.

xxi Sparke 2005, 239 – 245.

xxii Sparke 2005, 43.

xxiii Sparke 2005, 119.

xxiv Sparke 2005, 176.

xxv Sparke, P. (1978) 'From a Lipstick to a Steamship: The Growth of the American Industrial Design Profession; in *Design History: Fad or Function* (London: Design Council), 21.

xxvi Sparke 2005, 37 – 47.

xxvii Sparke 2005, 79 – 91.

xxviii Sparke 2005, 67 – 77.

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<sup>xxxix</sup> Sparke 2005, 239 – 243.

<sup>xxx</sup> Sparke 2005, 326.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Sparke 2005, 167 – 177.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Sparke, P. (2008) *The Modern Interior* (London: Reaktion Books), 66.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Sparke 2005, 79 – 91.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Sparke 2005, 89.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Frankel, L. (ed.) (1994) *Herter Brothers: Furniture and Interiors for a Gilded Age* (New York: Harry N. Abrams in association with The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston), 57.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Frankel, 1994, 83.

Elsie de Wolfe, interior decorator, however, continued to exist alongside Lady Mendl, socialite, although she allowed the New York office, which was managed for a period of time by her brother Edgar and his second wife, Winifred, to function autonomously while she continued to work directly with friends and the most important clients. So important was the Elsie de Wolfe name to the operation of the firm, however, that she maintained a sufficient professional presence to ensure its continued success. Female decorators continued to follow the professional model established by de Wolfe, but male-dominated modernism ascended as the dominant aesthetic ideology, eclipsing and undermining the achievements of de Wolfe and her disciples. MRS. de WOLFE was the first to coordinate the use of disparate styles and epochs, all in direct violation of accepted Victorian decorating standards. Her fame and power as a decorator were legendary. Nina Campbell, a London decorator and a biographer of Mrs. de Wolfe, cited mirrors, pale colors, chintz, the use of white flowers, interior trellaces and light-painted furniture from various periods as some of her signature touches. But Ms. Campbell, like others, said that it was far more the cumulative effect that brought this energetic woman her fame. It is precisely this sense of cumulative effect that brought this energetic woman her fame. Here's a profile of epic interior designer and socialite Elsie de Wolfe (1859-1950). Based in New York and Paris, de Wolfe decorated the homes of the Morgans, Vanderbilts, Fricks, and more. Indeed, de Wolfe was known for her good taste not only in houses, but also in the spaces she designed for some of the most elite private clubs, prominent businesses, notable educational facilities, and lavish mansions of the early 20th century — a time when the role of an interior designer, especially for women, was novel. Historically, interiors — particularly public spaces — were executed only by male architects or antique dealers. But with her penchant for delicate French design and pastel colors at a time when dark interiors were all the rage, de Wolfe's aesthetic quickly became noticed. Elsie de Wolfe, also known as Lady Mendl, (December 20, c. 1859 — July 12, 1950) was an American actress and interior decorator. Born in New York City, de Wolfe was acutely sensitive to environment from her earliest years, and became one of the first women interior designers, replacing heavy Victorian styles with light, intimate effects and uncluttered room layouts. Her marriage to English diplomat Sir Charles Mendl was seen as one of convenience, though she was proud to be called Lady Mendl, and her Elsie de Wolfe is a twentieth-century legend and is the mother of modern interior decoration. Her name is familiar to many who practice the art of interior design or who are linked to the fashionable world of tastemaking. She provided appropriate settings for the new rich in the first half of the twentieth century and in the process helped to shape our understanding of what we have come to know as the modern domestic interior. Through the measured re-examination of known materials as well as the review of history-clarifying documents that have been overlooked or underused by previous de Wolfe