



Oscar Wilde's America: Counterculture in the Gilded Age

Mary Warner Blanchard

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In 1882 Oscar Wilde toured America as the "Apostle of Aestheticism", his wit and brilliance and deliberate outrageousness creating controversy among audiences across the continent. The America visited by Wilde was a nation still badly shaken by the trauma of the Civil War and Reconstruction. In this atmosphere Wilde's message of regeneration through art and beauty seemed to many Americans to open new horizons of social possibility. In this book, a cultural history of the aesthetic movement in the United States, Mary W. Blanchard provides an account of a neglected dimension of American history. Blanchard shows that the aestheticism was a wide-ranging popular movement, implemented by an array of tastemakers, resisted by the moral guardians of Victorianism. She constructs the lives of the female visionaries who used the decorative arts to assault the conventions of middle-class milieu and to advance in the social and business worlds of the Gilded Age. She also shows how the movement allowed new forms of identity for men - in particular feminized or homosexual roles that were profoundly at odds with Victorian notions of manliness. Drawing on evidence from material culture, popular media, and history and literature, Blanchard reveals aestheticism as an oppositional movement in the American Gilded Age.

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