1
The Social Strands of Aestheticism

How did an aesthete live his or her life as art? Because aestheticism was both a high art movement and a popular social movement, charitable, missionary aestheticism existed within a constellation of social activities one might call aesthetic. One might attend a gallery opening at the institutional center for aestheticism, the Grosvenor Gallery (1877–1890), return home to one’s Norman Shaw house in the aesthetic suburb of Bedford Park, and the next day, a Sunday, attend an aesthetic church service led by the Rev. Hugh Reginald Haweis, whose wife’s treatises on *The Art of Beauty* (1878) and *The Art of Dress* (1879) would have inspired one’s own home and costume. Then in the afternoon one might volunteer as a docent guiding working people through a free art exhibition in the East End, lecturing them on silverwork or the paintings of G. F. Watts.

Missionary aesthetes constituted a closely-knit community: they knew one another, deliberated on social schemes together, admired one another, and occasionally battled with one another. An aesthete who chaired a committee on, say, the provision of public parks, might also be a trustee for an art museum in a working-class neighborhood, or a teacher in a university settlement scheme. At the time of her encounter with the schoolgirls cited in my Introduction, Henrietta Barnett had already worked under the tenement reformer Octavia Hill where she used her role as a volunteer rent collector to supervise and regulate slum families. It was through Hill that she had met her husband Samuel Barnett, and under Hill’s guidance, the couple accepted the ministry of the slum parish St Jude’s in Whitechapel, committing themselves to a life among East Enders. In the years to come, the Barnettts and their friends would be at the vortex of the missionary aesthetic community in London, facilitating various
movements to improve workers’ livelihoods and to educate workers
to what they after Matthew Arnold called a ‘higher life.’1 Starting with
small voluntary organizations like the People’s Concert Society
which performed free concerts in St Jude’s church, the Barnettts went
on to establish such national institutions as the garden suburb, the
Children’s Country Holiday Fund, and the university settlement move-
ment. The Barnettts’ names and those of their circle appear consistently
on the rosters of different committees. This mutual membership
among various philanthropic and cultural agencies is representative of
civic organizations in the 1880s.2

Until now, activists like Octavia Hill and the Barnettts have been
labeled cultural missionaries but not aesthetes. This characterization
opens up a difficult but significant quandary over definitions of aes-
theticism. If a cultural missionary dressed conservatively (swearing off
Oscar Wilde’s velvet breeches and lilies) while lobbying for Sunday art
gallery openings, then can we still call him an aesthete? If an aesthetic
activist wrote essays on the need for fresh air and decent housing
rather than poems, then can we still call her an aesthete? This chapter
is concerned with classification of a certain kind of aestheticism.
It builds on the work of Ruth Z. Temple and Ian Fletcher who each
observed that British aestheticism was not one coherent movement,
but actually encompassed several sub-movements with often contradic-
tory agendas.3 For instance, all decadents might have been aesthetes,
but not every aesthete was a decadent.4 This chapter will ask: how aest-
thetic were missionary aesthetes? Were they enmeshed in the material
culture of aestheticism? Or do we consider ‘missionary’ in ‘missionary
aesthete’ a kind of qualifier? One way of broaching these questions is
to adopt Talia Schaffer’s recent metaphor of a map of aestheticism, and
to imagine the figures and institutions in this study occupying an
intersection between social reform and aestheticism, a space where
these two worlds overlap.5

**Aesthetes, dandies, decadents**

In order to explore the link between social reformers and British aes-
theticism, we must first re-examine some of our original assumptions
about aestheticism itself. We most frequently associate the Aesthetic
Movement with a series of artifacts and attitudes: blue and white
china, peacocks feathers and lilies, an effeminate man or fragile
woman rapturously or listlessly drooping over them. These images
come to us not merely from satires of the movement, such as George