

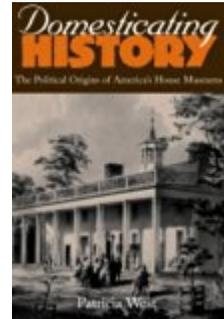
H-Net Reviews

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Patricia West. *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999. 241 pp. \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56098-836-6; \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56098-811-3.

Reviewed by Millie Jackson (Grand Valley State University)

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In *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums* Patricia West provides the background for four important house museums as well as a much denser history of the house museum movement in American history. The museums discussed, chronologically according to founding date, include George Washington's Mount Vernon, Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House, Thomas Jefferson's Monticello and the Booker T. Washington National Monument. West's history progresses from the work of women's voluntary associations in the 19th century to the profession of museumship in the 20th century. This study focuses on the struggles represented in political, gender, class and racial battles.

Political battles surrounded the establishment of Mount Vernon due, in part, to the onset of the Civil War. The Mount Vernon's Ladies' Association of the Union (MVLVA) envisioned a "public history museum" (3) and thought that the home could unify the country. Even though "Mount Vernon's establishment...reflected the primacy of the iconographic, sacralized home popularly envisioned as the heart of nineteenth century America" (1) conflicts between states rights and national rights took over. Mount Vernon would become the prototype for later movements to establish house museums and future groups would learn from the women's experiences.

West's narrative demonstrates how history has been sanitized by well meaning committees who worked to fund house museums. The Concord Women's Club invented their own version of Louisa May Alcott's life and home by promoting the home as a museum and Alcott's life as the story of *Little Women*. For these women "*Little Women* and Orchard House were emblems of virtuous

and ostentatiously traditional domesticity that could establish a reassuring stability they entered the new world of the twentieth century" (65). However, Alcott's life was not like the one she depicted in *Little Women*. Alcott's involvement in women's suffrage and reform were ignored initially. The establishment of Orchard House as a museum also shows the way life was changing in America. The intervening years between the founding of Mount Vernon in the mid-nineteenth century and Orchard House in 1912 had been ones of progress for women and for the country. The women involved in the preservation of Orchard House were members of a study club who were conscious of "pressing social problems and "conservationist" impulses toward their solutions" (56-57). These ladies were not "quaint, rather apolitical, antiquarian ladies ...concerned chiefly with tea parties and Chippendale" (59) anymore than the ladies of the MVLVA had been but they did view society differently. The Concord Women's Club had a political and social agenda to "save" a town which they saw changing due to the growth of suburbs and the influx of immigrants as well as preserve Orchard House.

West outlines how the new "museum men" (50) took over the house museum movement from women's organizations in the early twentieth century. These men included professional architects, state and federal government officials and industrialists. Wealthy men such as John D. Rockefeller created Colonial Williamsburg while Henry Ford worked on Greenfield Village. These projects represent recreations of historic homes on a larger scale. Ford stated that he had "reproduced American life as lived; and that, I think, is the best way to preserve at least part of our history and tradition" (97). Many explanations for Ford's desire to compile a village of houses

that sometimes seem unrelated are provided. Rockefeller “delegated recreation of Colonial Williamsburg to professional architects” (98). The appeal of Colonial Williamsburg focused on middle class consumers who took away a style as well as a historic lesson.

The founding of Monticello and the Booker T. Washington National Monument signal change in the house museum movement. Programs of the federal government, primarily from the New Deal, helped establish both houses as museums. Professional men and staffs took over the work which had once been delegated to women. Historical accuracy is no less of a problem than it had been during the previous fifty years, however. The house museum movement mirrors the social problems that faced America in the first half of the twentieth century.

Patricia West’s research assists the reader in understanding the complicated histories of house museums.

The homes represent far more than domestic life during the era of the inhabitants and, in fact, sometimes have not represented a historically accurate view at all. As many other movements, this one began as women’s work which was later taken over by men. The book contributes to women’s history as well as to histories of politics, class, race and architecture. For example, the discussion of the MVLA compliments Elizabeth Varon’s discussion of the MVLA in *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: The U of N.C. Press, 1998) as well as discussions in other recent works on women’s voluntary associations. West’s work dispels the mythologized views of founding house museums. This is a work which will be valuable to scholars in many disciplines.

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