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# Reading Historic Sites : Interpretive Strategies at Literary House-Museums

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*University of Pennsylvania*

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Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Historic Preservation 2004.

Advisor: Randall F. Mason

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# Reading Historic Sites : Interpretive Strategies at Literary House-Museums

## **Abstract**

This study examines interpretive strategies at house-museums with literary significance, and evaluates how the concept of the house as a readable text—as a social document of traces of past life—is balanced with the idea of a literary historic house as a place to interpret humanistic themes explored or embodied by the literary figures commemorated at the site. The three sites examined are the Emily Dickinson Museum in Amherst, MA; the Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site in Philadelphia, PA; and the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia. The basis for evaluation was an analysis of the following aspects of house interpretation: the presentation of the interior, including furnishings and collections; guided tours; other interpretive tools such as written materials available to visitors on site; and exhibits and other program activities. The house-museums in this study attempt to balance the text of domestic life with the literary legacy of the house's former inhabitants. The success of each of the three sites depends on their ability to abstract from the material reality of a house the broader humanistic themes that can be found in the recollection of individual lives and in our collective literary tradition.

## **Comments**

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## **Abstract**

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This study examines interpretive strategies at house-museums with literary significance, and evaluates how the concept of the house as a readable text—as a social document of traces of past life—is balanced with the idea of a literary historic house as a place to interpret humanistic themes explored or embodied by the literary figures commemorated at the site. The three sites examined are the Emily Dickinson Museum in Amherst, MA; the Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site in Philadelphia, PA; and the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia. The basis for evaluation was an analysis of the following aspects of house interpretation: the presentation of the interior, including furnishings and collections; guided tours; other interpretive tools such as written materials available to visitors on site; and exhibits and other program activities. The house-museums in this study attempt to balance the text of domestic life with the literary legacy of the house's former inhabitants. The success of each of the three sites depends on their ability to abstract from the material reality of a house the broader humanistic themes that can be found in the recollection of individual lives and in our collective literary tradition.

**READING HISTORIC SITES:  
INTERPRETIVE STRATEGIES AT LITERARY HOUSE-MUSEUMS**

Han Ariel Salzmann

A THESIS

in

Historic Preservation

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

2004

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## Chapter One: Introduction

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For there was an entire universe in that room, a miniature cosmology that contained all that is most vast ...<sup>1</sup>

The artistic potential of domestic life is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the house-museum<sup>2</sup> setting. In it, the previous inhabitants are posthumous co-curators of their lives, both the subject and medium of an installation in time and space.<sup>3</sup> House-museums dedicated to the commemoration of writers, artists, and collectors assume the burden of balancing the interpretation of the rich text of domestic life against that of the work and/or collections of the house's former occupants. Although enshrining the former habitat of Great Men (and, occasionally, women) satisfies visitors' taste for the cult of personality, the educational ideals implicit in the presentation and interpretation of buildings and material culture also demand a critical examination of how the sites in question communicate the significance of their subject to their audiences. The museological phenomenon of the house-museum corresponds with the transformation of that which is essentially a private realm into public heritage, the abstraction of collective memory from the intimate display of domestic life. However, as a public display of private life, the presentation of the house is never divorced from the public realm. The display of the house is meant to evoke a *miniature cosmology*, both as a reflection of the world at large and as a temporary escape from the chaos of time, and an antidote for the disordered nature of memory. In its ostensible completeness, in the closure of its story granted by the passage of time, the house-museum has the same relation to a lived-in house as narrative has to lived experience. As one beholds the miniature furnishings of a dollhouse, one similarly regards the objects and spatial arrangements of the house-



museum—from a distance.<sup>4</sup> We are separated from the objects in a dollhouse by the physical impossibility of inhabiting such a miniature space, whereas the house-museum evinces more of a temporal distance. As Gaston Bachelard wrote in *The Poetics of Space*, “the house furnishes us dispersed images and a body of images at the same time.”<sup>5</sup> The panoramic view of time in the house-museum conveys both the materiality of a specific place in a specific time period and a collection of images that comprise its miniature universe. Thus, as literary theorist Susan Stewart notes, “what might be seen as a microcosmic tendency is macrocosmic as well.”<sup>6</sup> House-museums are not simply houses that are also museums; rather, they represent an ensemble of people, buildings, and objects that merge to create an allegory of reality.<sup>7</sup>

Like the human body, a house is greater than the sum of most of its parts. “Museumizing” a house places heritage value not only on material objects but also on things of a distinctly less material and infinitely more elusive nature, such as the former inhabitants’ tastes, social mores and ambitions, and, in the case of artists and writers, on their literary work. House-museums whose primary significance lies in their connection with literary figures and their output highlights the problem of using the material existence of a house to communicate the abstract existence of the spiritual and intellectual lives of its inhabitants, the miniature cosmologies contained within their work, and their creative influences and cultural context.

This study aims to evaluate how the interpretation of three literary house-museums is shaped by the desire to incorporate objects and places connected with writers into the text of their life and work; to balance the alternating notions of material culture as the means and the end of the interpretation; and to situate the subject matter in an

historical, social, and literary context. The three case studies are: The Emily Dickinson Museum in Amherst, Massachusetts; Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia. Whereas the first two sites were the homes of writers, the Rosenbach Museum and Library is the former residence of two antiquarian brothers, one of whom was a legendary book dealer and collector. The analysis of the following aspects of house interpretation will serve as the primary basis for evaluation: the presentation of the interior, including furnishings and collections; guided tours; other interpretive tools such as written materials available to visitors on site; and exhibits and other program activities.

### **The Emily Dickinson Museum**

The Emily Dickinson Museum is comprised of the Dickinson Homestead, where the poet was born and spent most of her life, and the home of her brother and sister-in-law, The Evergreens. As an ensemble, the two houses create a portrait of Dickinson's close-knit circle of friends and family and of her geographical and cultural milieu. The two homes that together form the Dickinson Museum contain much of their original furnishings, giving the curators of the site a rich material culture context in which to situate the interpretation of Emily Dickinson's life and work. The Evergreens remained in the Dickinson family throughout its history, but the Dickinson Homestead was sold to another family in 1916 and underwent some structural and mechanical changes to accommodate its new owners. In 1965, Amherst College purchased the Dickinson Homestead and opened it to the public. The interpretation of the Emily Dickinson Museum is centered largely around the domestic life of the women and children in the

two households—a relatively rare choice of focus in heritage institutions. The Emily Dickinson Museum highlights the problem of representing intangible aspects of a person’s life, such as the life of the mind or the inner life of its occupants, through tangibles such as the facts and artifacts of one’s life.

### **Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site**

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) lived in Philadelphia between 1838 and 1844. The last year of his stay in Philadelphia was spent in the house at Seventh and Spring Garden Streets that now bears his name. Although Poe lived in many other cities such as Baltimore, Boston, New York City, and Richmond, the Philadelphia years were some of the most successful in his career as a man of letters, seeing the publication of the short stories “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and many other works of fiction, poetry, and criticism. Like his other residences, the house on Spring Garden Street was rented. Poe left no belongings in the house, which led the National Park Service to interpret the site as an empty space when it assumed control of the site in 1980. A short film and a ranger-led tour provide visitors with bibliographical information about Poe as they circulate through the empty rooms of the house. The interpretive challenge of situating a house-museum in a location with no original material culture other than the house itself provides a compelling context for exploring the role of objects in conveying knowledge about the past and for investigating the legitimacy of loyalty to artifactual authenticity. Do objects contain the power to convey knowledge (in this case, about a man and his work)? Or is their display an end in itself to the extent that even their absence speaks volumes?

## **The Rosenbach Museum and Library**

The Rosenbach Museum and Library is located within two adjacent townhouses on a residential street in the city center of Philadelphia. It was opened to the public in 1954 after the deaths of its two co-founders, brothers Dr. Abraham Simon Wolf Rosenbach (1876-1952) and Philip Hyman Rosenbach (1865-1953). The Rosenbachs were well-known antiquarians who operated out of Philadelphia and New York City in the early part of the twentieth century. In 1949, they moved into the house that is now the museum and library, establishing a foundation for the public display of their collections after their deaths. The house is not operated as a restored house, but rather as an extension of the Rosenbach brothers' collection and passion for collecting. The focus on the Rosenbach brothers lends a framework to the collection contained within by placing it in the context of individual taste and arbitrary fortune. In contrast to the Poe and Dickinson house-museums, the Rosenbach Museum was conceived as a museum by its previous inhabitants. An added distinction is the occupants' position in the production of literature. Whereas Poe and Dickinson represent the production end of the spectrum, the Rosenbach brothers reside within the realm of the consumer.<sup>8</sup> Reading a book or going to a museum is an act of consumption in and of itself, but the collection of books for their potential value in the marketplace represents the materialization of the book-as-idea into the book-as-object.<sup>9</sup> By suggesting multiple readings, both of the house-museum and the museum within the house, the Rosenbach Museum and Library triangulates between the Poe House and Dickinson Museum, creating fertile ground for studying the interpretation of literary heritage in the house-museum setting.

Although the three sites are united by their varied associations with writers and books, they represent different types of house-museums, and each has a different approach to the buildings and objects at the site and to the subject matter interpreted through them. According to the typology developed by historian Charlotte Smith, both the Poe and Dickinson Houses fall into the category of the Great Man (or, as the case may be, Great Woman) Shrine, where the place and objects connected to the Great Ones radiate an aura not conventionally associated with inanimate objects.<sup>10</sup> In the Great Man Shrine, objects with negligible monetary value can attain the status of rare and precious objects by virtue of their ownership and/or use. The representative or the typical thereby becomes unique and resists classification. The Rosenbach Museum and Library belongs to the category of the Collector's House "where an aesthete's or intellectual's collection is preserved in its entirety and (sometimes) original arrangement."<sup>11</sup> Private collectors often stipulate the donation of their collections to public institutions or else establish museums for their display. Alternatively, some collectors choose to have their collections exhibited within their personal residences.

In her typology, Charlotte Smith includes two additional house-museum genres: the Aesthetic House, valued as a superior exemplar of a style or period, and the Social History House, exhibiting and evoking the lives of ordinary people. In the Emily Dickinson Museum, the latter approach is enmeshed with the Great Man Shrine genre, so that the poet's domestic life and work, along with those of her immediate family, provide a context for the interpretation of her literary work.

The second chapter of this study is devoted to a discussion of the social and cultural implications of collecting and preserving artifacts from the past. As an artifact

that represents a multi-layered text, a house can stand many readings *and* writings, in some cases endorsing the status quo; in others, inciting visitors to reconsider conventional beliefs and assumptions by reflecting multiple interpretations of a person, event, or of the causal relationships between an object and the recounted historical narrative.<sup>12</sup> The three subsequent chapters will analyze the interpretive strategies at each of the three sites. The final chapter of this study will serve as a recapitulation, synthesizing the conclusions drawn from the evaluation of the interpretive strategies of each site.

## Chapter Two: The Preservation of Public Memory in the Private Realm

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Just as the history of the United States is a story of settling, building homes, domesticating land, and defining space, our fiction is, among other things, a history of the project of American self-definition wherein house-building, and for women, house-keeping, have been recognized as a kind of autobiographical enterprise—a visible and concrete means of defining and articulating the self.<sup>13</sup>

Implicit in fixing the “done” of the past into temporal and spatial frameworks is establishing a distinction between *then* and *now*, the acknowledgement of the distance between past ways of being and present powers of recall.<sup>14</sup> In his work on collective memory, social theorist Maurice Halbwachs made a distinction between living tradition and history: Memory based in lived experience links individuals to family, religion, class, and nation, but after a tradition is no longer based in lived experience it is open to the interpretive gaze of the historian.<sup>15</sup> The preservation of the past in a house-museum constitutes the generation or perpetuation of an historical narrative. Although the creation of historical narratives may be seen as a means of socialization that attempts to bring together diverse groups of people under a unifying ideology, this process necessarily involves a combination of forced and voluntary forgetting. In contrast, literary theorist Azade Seyhan argues that literature “tends to record what history and public memory often forget,” narrating “both obliquely and allegorically, [and] thereby preserving what can be censored and encouraging interpretation and commentary in the public sphere.”<sup>16</sup> House-museums commemorating the lives of writers or other literary figures must strive to illuminate literature’s veiled meanings as well as a house’s formal incorporation of the context of domestic life. In contrast to the particularistic nature of many house-museums

in the United States, a broadly defined literary tradition has the potential to be shared by most members of a society irrespective of age, gender, class, race, and ethnicity.

As American society began to experience an increasing sense of flux after the Civil War and again after World War II, the rate at which the number of institutions dedicated to collecting and cataloguing objects and places of the past grew.<sup>17</sup> This interest was relatively new in the United States, where in 1812, the State of Pennsylvania proposed to demolish Independence Hall and sell the land to developers.<sup>18</sup> Shortly before the Civil War, George Washington's revolutionary headquarters at Newburgh was spared demolition by a nod from the New York State Legislature, whose members remarked that "It will be good for our citizens in these days when we hear the sound of disunion reiterated from every part of the country ... to chasten their minds by reviewing the history of our revolutionary struggle."<sup>19</sup> The first house-museum in the United States was thus designated in 1850. Although neither the preservation of Washington's headquarters at Newburgh nor of his home at Mt. Vernon had a sufficiently chastening effect to prevent disunion, the impetus to commemorate the American past was strengthened considerably in the years following the Civil War. Within the context of the cultural politics of a young nation in search of national identity, Americans started to erect monuments, preserve battlefields, and enshrine dwellings once inhabited by Great Men. This new interest in preserving the past found its object not only at sites of military significance such as Valley Forge and Gettysburg, but also in the domestic life of its founders and more anonymous early settlers.

Although the Civil War represented one turning point in the historic preservation movement, the most significant increase in historic property museums was seen in the



years following World War II. An informal survey conducted by the National Trust in 1988 found the number of house-museums to be around 5000.<sup>20</sup> It is estimated that roughly sixty percent of all historic property museums in the United States came into being in the years during and after the 1960s.<sup>21</sup> This number is likely a conservative estimate, yet it represents a substantial fraction of history museums in the United States. After the American ideal of the independent settler was channeled into the ideal of homeownership, the exhibition of the domestic setting became increasingly important for the purpose of American self-definition.<sup>22</sup>

Just as the organization of the home had implications for the social and political organization of society at large, the ordered display of remnants from the past in museums implied, according to archaeologist Kevin Walsh, “a control over the past through an emphasis on the linear, didactic narrative.”<sup>23</sup> In western historiography, the formation of historical narratives is closely related to the concept of a unilinear view of history. It is within this framework of linear motion that the notion of progress is situated. In her discussion of the representation of the nude, literary theorist Susan Stewart writes that motion cannot be depicted without distortion.<sup>24</sup> Analogously, the motion of progress cannot be depicted without the creation of certain static moments from which we can measure our distance. The organization of the past into static periods, and, by extension, of the conditions that shaped it, simultaneously acknowledges a rupture with the past, as well as signaling a nostalgia for its return. This nostalgia may be read both as the individual’s yearning for bygone times and also as a nation’s reiteration of its political ideology. After the Civil War, historian Michael Wallace writes, middle- and upper-class Americans became increasingly preoccupied with traditionalizing the past by preserving

“the tangible remains” of their domestic life.<sup>25</sup> He attributes this trend to their need to distinguish themselves from newer immigrants, thereby making the defense of “American values” an antidote for class struggle.<sup>26</sup> This expressed reverence for tradition is not superficial; indeed, it reveals a very human need to make sense of the present through the memorialization of the past. Whereas the reconstitution of the past in the present is a way of reinforcing national and institutional ideologies that encourage social cohesion and legitimize authority,<sup>27</sup> the need to traditionalize one’s collective past has been cited by many anthropologists as a critical element in the construction of national identity.<sup>28</sup> As historian Linda Young elaborates in “House Museums in Australia,”

Ancestor veneration is a widespread human expression. In anthropological contexts its function is generally interpreted as a stabilising ritual that confers the authority of ancestors on their descendent worshippers. Much the same can be said of its modern, western manifestations; justification of the contemporary generation’s presence and practice by reference to their great antecedents. Commemoration of ancestors affirms a continuity which hallows the present order.<sup>29</sup>

Whether they are state-sanctioned or privately run, heritage agencies tend to be conservative in their interpretation of domestic life. In general, historic house-museums in the United States represent a limited span of social and historical experience, commemorating the lives of the more prosperous segments of society and dating back to the period of white settlement in a region.<sup>30</sup> In addition to recognizing only certain groups of people and historical periods, house-museums also tend to represent a limited picture of the former inhabitants’ lives, overwhelmingly ignoring the roles of servants, slaves, and women beyond their domestic confines. The lack of information regarding the multi-faceted lives of women in the domestic realm is discussed in this study within the chapter devoted to the Emily Dickinson Museum.

The trend of peeking inside the homes of well-to-do or otherwise distinguished individuals presumably owes much of its appeal to the cozy, fairytale-like presentation of many house-museums where dissent and social inequality are far from the viewer's horizon. In *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, decorative arts specialist Michael Ettema notes that many nineteenth-century museum initiatives were based on the belief that artifacts contained abstract moral qualities that would be self-evident in their appearance.<sup>31</sup> Just as watching the now defunct television show *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* could conceivably instill genteel values in its viewers, it may be argued that visiting the house-museums of venerable or at least wealthy individuals may better one's general moral outlook. The social-reformist ideals of late nineteenth and early twentieth century middle and upper-middle class Americans played a role in the creation of many city parks, museums, the YMCA, and other cultural institutions. Many of the institutions that were established with the intent of reforming and uplifting working-class, mostly urban populations were predicated on the ideal of social regulation through aesthetic education.<sup>32</sup> The public display of the private realm in house-museums commemorating the lives of anonymous but representative people was meant to instill in visitors an ideology of domesticity<sup>33</sup> that created a nostalgia for a noble past. Alternatively, house-museums that commemorated the lives of famous people often chose to recount the noble characteristics attributed to the persons for whom they were created, thereby using "biography as a textbook for character teaching."<sup>34</sup>

Whether it commemorates the lives of anonymous or famous people, the interpretation of a house-museum involves a dialogue between the curator, the audience, and the sponsors of a site.<sup>35</sup> In the case of the Poe House, for example, the sponsor is the

National Park Service, and, by extension, the Federal Government. In designing an interpretation, the curators are obliged to consider both the agenda of the sponsors and the supposed desires of the audience. The interpretation thus reflects both popular understandings of history filtered through curators' perceptions of their audiences<sup>36</sup> and sponsors' perceptions of themselves.

The sponsors and original curators of the Rosenbach Museum and Library, the Rosenbach brothers, were motivated to translate their personal residence into a house-museum for the enlightenment of the public after their deaths, thus reflecting the romantic educational ideals of their era. Their collection is overwhelmingly the product of a selection process that depended on their clientele's and their own tastes. Like editors, the curators of an historic site select what they deem worthy of recall and exclude that which disrupts the continuity of the narrative, thereby inscribing themselves into the text of the site. As the product of a collector's taste, The Collector's House genre of house-museums represented by the Rosenbach Museum in this study provides a metaphor for the selection process inherent in the practice of historic preservation.

In a house-museum, objects and stories can be presented in context and in relation to one another, allowing the exploration of multiple interconnected narratives under one roof. However, house-museums that commemorate the lives of writers must also use the site as a medium for communicating the cultural significance of their subject matter. In *Interpreting Historic House Museums*, Jessica Foy Donnelly notes the danger of presenting the house and its contents as the "be-all and end-all" of the interpretation:

The object's greatest interpretive contribution is as a piece of the puzzle that, when assembled, presents settings and suggests meanings. Objects, taken collectively, give context and structure to the realities of domestic living. House museums are likely to overlook this potential when a larger

framework within which to place and sort fragments of information is absent.<sup>37</sup>

In the cases of the Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site and the Emily Dickinson Museum, the literary and cultural significance of the authors comprise the larger framework. Although the physical aspects of a site must be conserved in order to sustain the site's existence, the space is first and foremost a backdrop against which the lives and work of the occupants of the house at each of the three sites can be interpreted.

### Chapter Three: The Life of the Mind in the “Warm Parlour of the Past”<sup>38</sup>

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It is only by seeing women in their own homes, among their own set, just as they always are, that you can form any just judgement. Short of that, it is all guess and luck—and will generally be ill-luck. How many a man has committed himself on a short acquaintance, and rued it all the rest of his life!<sup>39</sup>

The true economy of housekeeping is simply the art of gathering up all the fragments, so that nothing be lost. I mean fragments of *time*, and well as *materials*.<sup>40</sup>

The room he lived in was a dream space, and its walls were like the skin of some second body around him, as if his own body had been transformed into a mind...<sup>41</sup>

The purpose of poetry is to remind us how difficult it is to remain just one person, for our house is open, there are no keys in the doors, and invisible guests come in and out at will.<sup>42</sup>

Writers have often used houses as metaphors for the psychological and social spaces inhabited by their characters, as well as for the structure of the text and the writing process itself. Examples of this self-defining and self-referential metaphor abound in works of American literature from *Walden*, Thoreau’s manifesto in which the materialization of “simple and sincere” values is realized in the author’s self-made cabin in the woods; to Tony Morrison’s *Beloved*, in which the house is permeated by a spirit that haunts each character according to her individual history and personality.<sup>43</sup> The Emily Dickinson Museum in Amherst, Massachusetts relies on a similar narrative license as the aforementioned texts: The house-museum which commemorates the life and creative influences of the celebrated poet is structured around the notion that there is a connection between the interior of a writer’s home and her inner life. Poetry critic Christopher Benfey remarks that in the case of Emily Dickinson this supposition is not ill founded: “Dickinson’s poetry is so rooted in specific places, real and imagined, that what we need is not another history of her life and art but a geography—or, more precisely, a topography—beginning in the house where she was born.”<sup>44</sup> Emily Dickinson (1830-

1886) died in the same house in which she was born and spent the last twelve years of her life in self-imposed seclusion, rarely having left the chrysalis of her bedroom. During this time she corresponded with friends and occasionally entertained family members and close friends. The Emily Dickinson Museum is comprised of two houses on adjacent lots that marked the physical boundaries of the poet's existence for most of her life. The Dickinson Homestead, built in 1813 by the poet's grandfather, was home to Emily Dickinson for all but fifteen years of her life. It was in this house that after Dickinson's death her sister Lavinia discovered hundreds of poems sewn together into little booklets of sixteen to twenty pages each. Although indications of Dickinson's literary talent were evident in her written correspondence and the few poems she shared with close friends and family, it was not until her sister's discovery of the manuscripts in her bedroom that her talent became recognized publicly. The second house in the museum complex was built by Dickinson's father in 1856 on the occasion of her brother Austin's marriage to her close friend Susan Gilbert. In the Victorian fashion, Austin and Susan Gilbert Dickinson named their Italianate villa The Evergreens, signaling a shift from the pious modesty of the Puritan New England town. Emily Dickinson divided most of her life between the two households, living at the Homestead with her parents and sister Lavinia and taking part in social gatherings and family life at The Evergreens. After seven years of intermittent schooling at Amherst Academy, she attended Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in nearby South Hadley, but returned home after the first year. The core of the visitor experience at the Emily Dickinson Museum is a nearly two-hour guided tour of the two houses that uses the history of the Dickinson family as a background against

which the creative impulses and poetic work of Emily Dickinson can be interpreted.<sup>45</sup>

According to their official website,

The Emily Dickinson Museum is dedicated to educating diverse audiences about Emily Dickinson's life, family, creative work, times, and enduring relevance, and to preserving and interpreting the Homestead and The Evergreens as historical resources for the benefit of scholars and the general public.<sup>46</sup>

The main thrust of the museum interpretation is that Emily Dickinson's physical and cultural surroundings exercised a great influence on her poetry. The Emily Dickinson Museum is both a shrine to the poet and to the cultural and political institutions her family represented. However, the house-museum also takes a social-historical approach to the stories of the two households by focusing attention on the Dickinson women and their work in the house. While the commemoration of Emily Dickinson is the *raison d'être* of the museum, the house tour focuses primarily on the ambitions and achievements of the Dickinson men and provides an account of the personal lives and work of the Dickinson women and children. The theme of Emily Dickinson's domestic life provides a coherent interpretive framework, and the tour of the two houses effectively uses the daily rituals of cleaning, cooking, entertaining, and caring for the young and the elderly to give immediacy to its evocation of the poet's home life. Although the museum interpretation convincingly situates Emily Dickinson in the lives of the two households, it is less successful in placing the poet in the context of her literary peers. The account of Emily Dickinson's cultural and familial context serves to create an "objective surface of detail," whose intensely private subject, Emily Dickinson, is meant to emerge "from the pattern of its absences."<sup>47</sup> So it is through her family and larger social context that we learn who she was, and, perhaps more significantly, who she was not. The guided tour



emphasizes that Dickinson's fiercely personal view of the world was formulated in contrast to the conventional institutions, such as church and marriage, that her family and society at large ostensibly embraced. However, as effectively as the poet's unique disposition and worldview are transmitted through the interpretation, the larger picture of her literary historical significance remains unclear. The Emily Dickinson Museum provides such a comprehensive background of familial and social circumstances that its subject gets lost in the details. Similar to a natural history diorama exhibiting hundreds of species of butterflies in which it is difficult to choose one insect from the other, Emily Dickinson's complex personae are submerged below the minutiae of domestic life.

After the death of Lavinia Dickinson, its last inhabitant, the Dickinson Homestead was sold in 1916 to an Amherst family. In recognition of its cultural significance, Amherst College bought the Homestead in 1965. The college used the building as faculty housing with intermittent public access to Emily Dickinson's bedroom until 1994. Some of the original furnishings of the Homestead survive, and attempts have been made to replace furniture and objects that were known to have been in the house during Dickinson's time. The Evergreens remained in the Dickinson family until recently, maintained by the Martha Dickinson Bianchi Trust established in memory of Emily Dickinson's niece, daughter of Austin and Susan Gilbert Dickinson. Because The Evergreens has remained almost unchanged since its latest refurbishing by Austin and Susan Gilbert Dickinson in the late nineteenth century, it provides an accurate portrayal of some aspects of its inhabitants' domestic life. This house is less directly related to Emily Dickinson, but it provides a relevant example of the poet's familial and cultural milieu. Although it is somewhat long, the extensive tour of the two houses allows visitors

to understand the houses and their furnishings in the context of the inhabitants rather than simply as relics of bygone times. For several years the Homestead and The Evergreens worked collaboratively on tours, public programs, and other projects. Following a market study and business plan that concluded that the two houses would succeed as a combined historic site, the Trustees of Amherst College and the Martha Dickinson Bianchi Trust asked the regional Probate Court for approval to transfer ownership of The Evergreens from the Trust to the College. A new governing board was formed to oversee the museum's future development. Associate Director of the Emily Dickinson Museum, Jane Wald, noted that the merging of the two historic house-museums allowed for a more comprehensive interpretation of Dickinson's life, combining the "aura" of the poet in the Homestead with the better preserved, more intact domestic setting of The Evergreens.<sup>48</sup>

Whereas the Dickinson Homestead allows a glimpse of Dickinson's domestic life and provides visitors with the opportunity to see the bedroom in which she wrote most of her poetry, The Evergreens provides glimpses into the lives of Dickinson's brother and sister-in-law, who were prominent in the social and political life of Amherst. Taken as a whole, the two houses represent both the Great [Wo]man's Shrine house-museum, honoring the life and work of a literary figure, and the Social History house-museum in which the lives of ordinary people are interpreted. Due to its interpretive focus on the female members of the households, the Emily Dickinson Museum belongs to a minority within the genre of the Social History house-museum. There are relatively few house-museums in the United States that commemorate the lives of women.<sup>49</sup> Exceptions are found in the houses of "permissibly famous"<sup>50</sup> women such as authors, including Louisa May Alcott's house in Concord, Massachusetts, and in the houses of women who were

the wives, mothers, and daughters of famous men such as the Mary Washington House in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Although the interpretation at the Emily Dickinson Museum devotes attention to the lives of the women and children in the two households, it succeeds only partially in challenging traditional notions about the value of domestic labor done by women. Limited acknowledgement of women's roles beyond the nursery and the kitchen is made. For example, Susan Gilbert Dickinson's superior hosting abilities are described in *The Evergreens*. However, there is no mention that parties and entertaining in the parlor were venues through which middle-class women enhanced their husbands' social standing by demonstrating his ability to support them in comfort.<sup>51</sup> Instead, parlor parties are presented as quaint rituals that reveal Susan Gilbert Dickinson's superior housekeeping abilities and social ambitions. Although its focus on "women's work" is admirable, the Emily Dickinson Museum does not convincingly present the work done by women in the private realm as an essential counterpart to the work done by men in the public sphere.

Emily Dickinson maintained a primarily solipsistic existence inside her room and mind. She led an outwardly quiet life that grew increasingly solitary in the last twelve years of her life. The tour of the Homestead and *The Evergreens* recounts the lives of her family and friends, as if in the hope that their lives will give form to Emily Dickinson's mysteriously inscrutable presence. Ironically, in its attempt to flesh out Dickinson's presence, the museum resembles a social history museum interpreting New England domestic life in the nineteenth century more than it does a literary site dedicated to commemorating the work of a celebrated poet. Whereas the gift shop in the Homestead offers, among other publications, a booklet entitled *Emily Dickinson: Profile of the Poet*

as *Cook*, none of the poet's published works is available for sale on site. In defense of the museum, there is a shelf in the gift shop that holds sample copies of Dickinson's poetry and correspondence that are available for sale in a nearby bookstore. However, in situating Dickinson within the framework of her domestic activities, "the poet at home," and the "the poet as cook" invariably overshadow the poet as poet.<sup>52</sup>

The notion that merely observing the Great [Wo]man's relics is an edifying experience is an essential component of the curators' interpretation of the Dickinson Homestead. When asked what role the museum plays in preserving the literary legacy of Emily Dickinson, Jane Wald replied that although the museum promotes Dickinson's poetry through the house tour and other program activities, it is Dickinson's enduring "presence" in the Homestead that is hoped to leave visitors with a greater appreciation of her life and work.<sup>53</sup> The Emily Dickinson Museum highlights the problem of balancing the presentation of historical facts and artifacts with the invocation of the imagination to understand the less material aspects of a person's life such as poetic passion. In part, the museum also suffers from the fact that very little happened in the life of Emily Dickinson that punctuated the lives of other women of her era and class, such as marriage and childbirth. The museum's attempt to identify the sources of her poetic inspiration is a way of substantiating her otherwise uneventful life. The account of the life and times of the Dickinson family provides visitors with a tangible message from which they are meant to extract the literary significance of Emily Dickinson. However, unwittingly the museum interpretation further mystifies its subject by obscuring her in a profusion of details.

Although the museum provides visitors with ample information about the life and times of the Dickinson family, it does so in a vacuum, assuming a priori knowledge on the part of the visitors of the larger cultural, political, and literary milieu of the United States in the nineteenth-century. There are three main “themes” at the Emily Dickinson Museum around which guides are obliged to structure the scripts they create for the tour of the houses.<sup>54</sup> Working within pre-determined boundaries, each tour guide designs his/her script according to personal interests, thereby rationalizing repeat visits to the museum. In addition, it implies that the museum hires guides who already have an interest in the poet. One of the interpretive themes is that “Emily Dickinson was a poet of extraordinary ability and output.”<sup>55</sup> However, absent any sense of the literary scene of her time, the visitor has relatively little with which to compare Emily Dickinson against. Similarly, although the fact that Emily Dickinson had access to education and other privileges not commonly granted to women in her time is stated during the tour, the lack of any concrete comparison between the conditions of white middle- to upper-class women’s lives and those of poor women or women of color significantly weakens the perception of the exception she represents. The interpretation of the two houses does not aim to be a lesson in women’s history; however, the fact that the guided tour strongly emphasizes Dickinson’s uniqueness begs for an examination of comparable entities. In the end, one fails to understand exactly which qualities made Dickinson unique. Because of its insistence on presenting Dickinson as unclassifiable, the interpretation fails to relate her life to those of the visitors. Although relevance is clearly a relative concept, it is hard to imagine the interpretation of the Emily Dickinson Museum relating to an audience with diverse interests and backgrounds as the mission statement hopes. The themes of the

interpretation are well-organized and are clearly conveyed during the tour of the houses, but could still benefit from re-evaluation. For example, instead of the theme which states that Emily Dickinson was a poet of “extraordinary ability and output,” Emily Dickinson could be placed in a literary and historical context that would attempt to explain *why* she is considered to be a poet of extraordinary ability. Parallels could be drawn with writers such as Whitman and Emerson, locating Emily Dickinson in an artificial context of fellow writers and poets that nevertheless provides visitors with a critical perspective of her world and work. Due to her reclusive nature, Emily Dickinson would likely not have placed herself in the physical or figurative company of other writers, but this need not prevent the museum from presenting Dickinson’s life and work in a literary historical context.

## Chapter Four: The Empty House and Its Discontents

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Nature is a Haunted House — but Art — a House that tries to be haunted.<sup>56</sup>

Perhaps you will then come to believe, O reader, that there is nothing more marvelous or madder than real life, and that all the poet could do was to catch this as a dark reflection is caught in a dull mirror.<sup>57</sup>

Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)<sup>58</sup>

Only lightweights ... are impressed by the detritus of musicians' lives—the cast-off clothing and lyric sheets and concert posters and magazines that once cluttered around someone famous. It's the music, not the stuff, that matters. The music—the process of making music—is antithetical to the kind of displays of things that are the natural province of museums.<sup>59</sup>

The Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site in Philadelphia is one of four house-museums in the United States that commemorates the life and work of Edgar Allan Poe.<sup>60</sup> Part of the National Park System, the Philadelphia Poe House is in walking distance of Independence National Historical Park, which includes the Liberty Bell Center, Independence Hall, and the Second Bank of the United States among others. In spite of its physical proximity to most of the sites in the Independence complex, the Poe House is separated from the dominant narrative of Independence Park. Most of the sites that make up Independence Park commemorate the birth of the United States, and their historical significance derives largely from events that took place in the eighteenth century. The Poe House belongs to the period a few decades before the Civil War, when Philadelphia was a booming industrial and manufacturing center that attracted mass immigration to the city. Although the Poe House is located just a few city blocks north of the Liberty Bell Center and Independence Hall, it is difficult for tourists visiting Independence Park to reach the Poe House on foot because of an expressway just north of the Independence

complex.<sup>61</sup> Ideologically, too, the narrative of Poe's life is diametrically opposed to the mythic story of self-realization embodied by the Founding Fathers of the United States. Poe was orphaned at an early age and found little familial or societal acceptance during his lifetime. As a result, he lived most of his life with very limited financial means, never achieving the American ideal of homeownership.<sup>62</sup> Although the location of the Poe House in the Spring Garden area, which used to lie outside of the city proper, is a reflection of Poe's socio-economic stature in the nineteenth century, the construction of the interstate expressway reflects contemporary attitudes in city planning that have served to perpetuate the historical division of the city. The historical and geographical distance of the Poe House to Independence Park provides a metaphor for the location of Poe on the margins of the social and political mainstream.

Edgar Allan Poe has gained popularity in the United States since his death, but much of his appeal lies in his reputation as a teller of dark and gruesome tales, rather than as a figure of enormous literary talent and critical acumen. A book published in Philadelphia in 1906 entitled *Physiognomy How to read character in the face and to determine the capacity for love, business, or crime*, includes a portrait of Poe with the heading of "'Pessimistic' Type," and the following character assessment (see Figure 2):

On looking at this fine head, we perceive at once that the imaginative faculty and creative powers preponderate very largely.... A love of the weird and fantastic is shown by the prominence to the left of the region of ideality.... In the large ear with its full lobe and thin helix we find fastidiousness, and a nature easily influenced by the senses....<sup>63</sup>

A bronze statue of Poe that is now located in the plaza of the University of Baltimore Law School provides a different image of the author: Executed by American sculptor Sir Moses Jacob Ezekiel, the statue shows Poe in a state of repose, his head tilted to one side



in quiet contemplation. This classical memorial, which was dedicated in 1921, reveals none of the tumult and inquietude commonly associated with Poe's life. The popular perception of Poe as a brooding, psychologically unhinged character has at times overshadowed his literary achievements. However, this romantic representation of a man of letters provides a welcome counterweight to the often sensationalistic and sometimes trivial representations of Poe in popular culture.

The Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site faces the challenge of balancing the spectacle of Poe's life with his literary legacy. The complex of three adjoining brick row houses that makes up the site was assembled by Poe enthusiast Richard F. Gimbel in the 1930s and declared a National Historic Site by Congress in 1978. Since the National Park Service acquired the houses in 1980, it has carried out extensive architectural investigations to determine the construction sequence of the buildings, and to identify and date interior alterations made since the structures were built in the 1840s. The interior walls of the Poe House proper have been stripped down to reveal multiple layers of paint and traces of old mechanical systems, some of the trim and other woodwork believed to have been added after Poe's time has been removed, and no period furniture has been installed in the space. On the eastern façade of the house, which has been covered by the construction of one of the other museum buildings, the plaster has been stripped to the laths to expose the former location of the front door. The Poe House provides visitors with a ranger-led tour through the three floors and basement of the house that recounts Poe's biography and literary accomplishments in an engaging manner that often involves interaction between the guide and visitors. According to museum staff, only one half of visitors take the ranger-led tour, while the other half take a self-guided tour. There is also

a brief film about Poe's life, and a room furnished after Poe's taste as prescribed in his essay "The Philosophy of Furniture." The piece was first published in Burton's *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1840 while Poe was living in Philadelphia. The Poe House sponsors a number of auxiliary events, exhibits, and programs relating to Poe, on- and off-site throughout the year. The site also collaborates with the local school district in publishing a teacher's handbook for classroom use.

Interpreting the life of a writer involves not only interpreting his biography, but also his work. It is therefore relevant to ask what a site dedicated to the interpretation of the life and work of a writer should be: an assessment of his belongings and other available evidence in the hopes that it will paint a portrait of the man behind the words? But this investigation in the prop-room of a man's life is flawed without props. In the introduction to the Historic Structures Report of the Poe House prepared for the National Park Service, architect Alvin Holm enthusiastically compares the process of studying the Poe House to the unraveling of a Poe tale: "The experience of working on the Poe House ... was in fact quite like an unfolding narrative more suitable for the pen of an Edgar Poe than for a restoration architect."<sup>64</sup> Poe left no belongings behind in the house and no primary documents have been discovered to date that reveal its contents during Poe's residence. In the report, Holm advocates re-furnishing the Poe House conjecturally, deeming the evocation of Poe's domestic life to be of vital importance to the understanding of the site.<sup>65</sup> According to Unit Sites Manager Stephen Sitarski, however, Park Service policy does not allow re-furnishing without sufficient evidence of the historical furniture and its placement.<sup>66</sup> The lack of authentic material culture in the Poe House has left the managers at a standstill, highlighting the importance of considering the

primary message that is meant to be conveyed by the interpretation. If the material culture is the message, then the house is merely a repository for non-existent objects. On the other hand, if the evocation of Poe's domestic life is the goal of the interpretation, then visual rather than historical authenticity should suffice, and the house should be re-furnished according to the better judgement of the site managers.<sup>67</sup> Although the legislation passed by Congress to create the Poe National Historic Site describes the buildings and land as assets that should be preserved, the stated reason for adding the site to the National Park System is the "literary importance attained by Edgar Allan Poe."<sup>68</sup> If, as suggested by Congress, Poe's literary legacy is the primary message of the house-museum, then the house is a means rather than an end of the interpretation. The most significant thing left behind by Poe are his words. If we are to gain a better understanding of him through this house, rather than simply *in* this house, the space must combine the concept of a house as a readable text—as a document of collective life and personal development—with the notion that a literary text can be understood spatially and structurally.<sup>69</sup>

To interpret the life of an enigmatic man is not an easy task. Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) had many houses, not just in the various cities in which he lived but also in his texts. He never owned his own house, and for this reason none of his former residences—four of which were subsequently transformed into house-museums dedicated to the interpretation of his life and work—contains furnishing and personal effects that are confirmed to have belonged to Poe. For example, Edgar Allan Poe Cottage in the Bronx, where Poe and his wife spent the last years of their lives, contains among other things a desk, a nineteenth-century cast-iron stove, and a straw bed believed to have been

used in the house during their residence. A brochure for the site tells us that we can stand “in the same rooms where Poe created *Annabel Lee*,” and see “the rocking chair where he relaxed, and the bed in the tiny room where his beloved wife died.”<sup>70</sup> This description does create a portrait of Poe’s short and tragic life, but none of these things, whether it is authentic insofar as its ownership or not, yields more than a spectral portrait of the man who is a ghost in his own biography.

Like the four other house-museums dedicated to the interpretation of Poe, the Poe National Historic Site in Philadelphia has the difficult task of interpreting the life of a peripatetic and controversial man in a domestic setting. Because Poe moved often, it may seem a far stretch to interpret his life and work in a domestic setting. For example, Poe’s literary output was not as directly tied to or defined by a specific place as Emily Dickinson’s. To expect to find a direct connection between Poe and a space that enclosed him for approximately a year is perhaps unrealistic. However, given the fact that questions of identity, belonging, the relationship between body and mind, interior and exterior are frequently explored in Poe’s works, a house is an appropriate place to interpret his work, and through this, to gain a more precise understanding of the mind that stood behind the work.

In his fiction, Poe’s exploration of the dialectics of interior and exterior often manifested itself in the interweaving of a house’s material and spiritual reality. In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” the house, its inhabitants, and the narrator are all pervaded by the same dark spirit and ambiguous sense of guilt that threatens and ultimately succeeds in undoing each of them. The narrator finds himself in the company of a morbidly melancholic young man who lives in a rank, dilapidated mansion with his

equally morbid sister. In this tale, both the characters and the narrative are inseparable from the house.<sup>71</sup> As the plot proceeds and the narrator becomes increasingly incoherent, the text begins to dissipate as well, blurring conventional distinctions between animate and inanimate, observer and observed, madness and reason. More often than not, the blurring of boundaries in Poe's fiction constituted a threat to objective reality and individual identity, and ultimately to sanity. The equation or interchangeability of characters and places is clearly a device that works within the closed world of the narrative. However, Poe's assignation of similar characteristics to the setting and characters in his writings is not only a literary license or manipulation but also a means to explore ideas of home and interiority.<sup>72</sup>

The treatment of the visible world as a readable text allows Poe to extend the material reality of the house so as to create a symbolic structure that determines the nature of characters' relations to others, and to themselves.<sup>73</sup> In addition to providing a metaphysical structure within the boundaries of the narrative, the house can also represent a document of the traces left by people in the course of daily life. Houses, in general, can furnish us with evidence that reveals clues about the lives of their inhabitants. The Poe House is a potentially rich resource for showing the development of the Philadelphia row house, the history of families in the Spring Garden district, and could complement a larger narrative of urban development that began in the area around Independence Hall and gradually expanded west-, south-, and northward. In light of the fact that the majority of historic sites in Philadelphia commemorate the city's eighteenth-century significance, such an endeavor could fill a temporal gap in the public representation of history in the city. But can we expect to tell such a broad story without

compromising the primary motivation for preserving the house—the “literary importance attained by Edgar Allan Poe”? The Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site can be read as a document consisting of the traces of past life, but the site would be better served if it were used as an interpretive device to communicate Poe’s literary legacy.

The Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site in Philadelphia includes a small, brick house that was home to Edgar Allan Poe and his family between 1843 and 1844. All three houses on the site were built in separate campaigns in the 1840s.<sup>74</sup> Poe lived in Philadelphia with his wife Virginia and mother-in-law Maria Clemm between 1838 and 1844, during which time he lived at several locations throughout the city.<sup>75</sup> The house located roughly at the intersection of Seventh and Spring Garden Streets is the only one of his Philadelphia residences that survives. The Poe House proper, which is situated on the western rear side of the lot at 530 North Seventh Street, was built in 1840 as a freestanding, three-story, shed-roof brick house (see Figure 3). The house was fronted by east-west running Brandywine Street on the south during Poe’s time.<sup>76</sup> Less than a year after the rear portion of the lot was developed, another three-story brick house was built on the adjacent lot at 532 North Seventh Street. The third house in the complex, which occupies the eastern portion of the lot at 530 North Seventh Street, was built after Poe’s residence, probably around 1848. The construction of this building covered the eastern façade of the Poe House proper, blocking off the entrance that had been there during Poe’s residence. Currently, entrance to the site is through the building at 532 North Seventh Street.<sup>77</sup>

The Poe House was given to the City of Philadelphia by the Richard Gimbel Foundation for Literary Research in 1971. Colonel Richard F. Gimbel was a collector of

Poe's manuscripts, published works, and Poe-related curiosities. In 1933, Gimbel purchased the properties on 530 North Seventh Street, and in 1935, added the building at 532 North Seventh Street to the ensemble, opening the site as a private museum. Brandywine Street, which ran east and west in front of the Poe House proper, was removed following the Gimbel Foundation's purchase of the two lots immediately to the north and south of the Poe House complex in 1960. The buildings that adjoined the Poe House complex on either side were demolished subsequent to their purchase. The present-day configuration of the site was created in large part by the Gimbel Foundation. By the time Congress declared the Poe House a National Landmark in 1963, the museum had been refurbished and was surrounded by open space. Currently the site is flanked by two landscaped areas to the north and the south. No major renovations had taken place until 1978 following a City-commissioned architectural report undertaken in 1973. The Poe House was administered by the Free Library of Philadelphia until the National Park Service acquired the site in 1980. At this time, Gimbel's collection of Poe's published works, manuscripts, and objects—one of which is a stuffed raven that belonged to Charles Dickens and likely inspired Poe's renowned poem of the same name—resides in the Rare Book Department of the Free Library of Philadelphia.

Like its famous former inhabitant, the Philadelphia Poe House presents a number of inner conflicts. The Park Service's commitment to present artifactually authentic interiors has led to the creation of a space that does not look like any of the house's incarnations since its construction. Consequently, the desire to capture *the real thing* has resulted in a place that never existed. The Park Service's removal of architectural elements in the Poe House proper that post-date Poe's residence have resulted in a space

that looks as if it were in a state of perpetual renovation. As Jacques Derrida once noted, it is possible to say more than one intended by not saying enough.<sup>78</sup> Did the space look like this when Poe lived here? Were the walls unpainted, and the fireplace stripped of its framing? The fact that only one half of Poe House visitors take the ranger-led tour of the house leaves one to wonder what impressions visitors are taking away from the unfurnished setting on the self-guided tour of the space. The bare state is authentic insofar as it is not inauthentic, but the stripped-down, unfurnished interiors threaten to say more through absence than through presence. Both the Gimbel Foundation's and the Park Service's attempts to fence off the site spatially and temporally from the urban development that surrounded it has resulted in a highly limited reading of the site. The demolition of the two buildings on either side of the Poe House complex and the closing off of a section of Brandywine Street in the 1960s were regrettable decisions that demonstrate a tendency to isolate historic sites from their immediate environment, and, by extension, to deny the past's connection with the present.

Another conflict at the site is the balancing of Poe's life story with the more specific, Philadelphia chapter of his life. The number of Poe Houses in other cities allows the Philadelphia Poe House some leeway in presenting a more in-depth interpretation of his life in Philadelphia. The interpretive program at the Philadelphia Poe House takes a decidedly generalized approach to the narrative of Poe's life. Although the interpretation includes the overarching facts of his life and themes of his work, it could also focus more on Poe's reasons for coming to Philadelphia, his professional relationships there, and his reception in the city. In trying to recount Poe's entire history, the interpretation fails to ask what the *site* will allow us to interpret.<sup>79</sup> This could perhaps be partially achieved by



publishing a pamphlet in the form of a travel itinerary that takes tourists on a pedestrian trail of sites of significance to Poe in Philadelphia.

Although it is impossible to retrieve the demolished structures, it would still be feasible to recreate the section of Brandywine Street that ran along the southern façade of the Poe House. The installation of benches along the street could also create a needed rest area for visitors. However, the restoration of Brandywine Street would also correspond to an erasure of context. Charles Hosmer and others have pointed out that the preservation of historic sites has begun to have a history of its own. In her introduction to *Past Meets Present*, historian Jo Blatti writes,

We are correcting imperfections (moral, contextual, factual) in an earlier generation's view or replacing unfashionable presentation techniques with more current ones. This has consequences.... As with books of scholarship, popular films, and other cultural expressions, historical collections and exhibitions embody the ideas and questions that each generation asks of its past. Our task as public programmers is not to obliterate this historical record through reinstallation and reinterpretation but to find ways to incorporate elements of past interpretation into public programs.<sup>80</sup>

As our knowledge of the past is a cumulative process informed by “questions and interpretations that others have made in intervening years,”<sup>81</sup> taking away traces of past interpretations at an historic site is tantamount to the removal of historiographical context. The contemporary view of historic houses as social documents that contain the traces of past life has led to conservation practices that recognize “the diachronic nature of buildings through time.”<sup>82</sup> By refraining from applying a hierarchy of temporal significance, this approach to historic preservation endeavors to foster an ongoing dialogue between past and present by interpreting the building as a process rather than a product of change. Learning about the assumptions about the past held by previous

generations may stimulate visitors to regard history as a dynamic exchange between the past and the present, and, perhaps more importantly, may encourage them to adopt a critical approach to the current interpretation. As Christine Boyer noted in *The City of Collective Memory*, because “every act of conservation and restoration must necessarily be a translation of the work of art and a displacement of its original intent, it necessitates a critical perspective.”<sup>83</sup> Critical perspective becomes particularly important when we consider that in order to come to terms with the interventions or mistakes of the past, we must acknowledge their existence in the first place.<sup>84</sup> However, it is also relevant to question the extent to which the idea of an historical interpretation as a cultural product can be stretched. Like reading a book or watching a film, visiting an historic site is a mediated experience, but part of the rationale for visiting historic sites is to have a “real” experience, to be involved “with the *genius loci* of the heritage site, and the place of identity.”<sup>85</sup> If a site is to be reinterpreted to correct previous generations’ views of the past, and still remain legible to the visiting public, how much of previous interventions should be retained or omitted? The difficult task of reconciling the intended effect of a given historical site with its potential to stimulate reflection on the historical process must, in the end, be left to individual managers and curators. There is no one template that can be applied to every site irrespective of its age, size, beauty, uniqueness, or its role in the formation of national identity. The Poe House in Philadelphia is constrained by its size, lack of material culture, and the irretrievable loss of its built context. The curators and managers of the site must take into account the limitations of the site when considering the value of integrating past interventions into the current interpretation.

When the Park Service took over the Poe House from the city, all of the period furniture installed by the Gimbel Foundation was removed, thereby creating interiors that are unconventional by the standards of most historic house-museums. One of the factors that makes house-museums a popular subcategory of museums is the conceptual accessibility of the domestic setting.<sup>86</sup> An empty space can create a sense of defamiliarization in visitors and challenge their assumptions about the domestic environment. Many house-museums partially recreate or leave untouched the arrangement of furniture and objects left behind by the house's former inhabitants. However, this kind of interpretation can be problematic in that visitors' familiarity with the domestic setting may lead them to assume ideas about the house that are not accurate.

As Linda Young writes in one of her studies of house-museums in Australia,

[A] ... difficulty in the communicative efficacy of the furnished house setting may be the subliminal expectation among visitors that, just as they know how to 'read' a modern house setting to understand its occupants' socio-economic and cultural standing, so they can recognize it in a historic setting.<sup>87</sup>

As an example, visitors' perceptions of furniture that was in its time functional, and perhaps even modest, could be inflated because these objects are today regarded as antiques.<sup>88</sup> This can create misconceptions about the former inhabitants' tastes and economic stature. In spite of potential problems in communicating the meaning of household objects, furnished house-museums give visitors the sense of standing in front of the real thing. Again, as Linda Young notes,

The convention that furnished settings communicate meaning springs largely from the veneration of the Great Man's relics and from admiration of the Collector's collection in situ. Authenticity is the rationale of both kinds of house, where 'authenticity' means a guarantee that the place and the material on show contain the special magic or aura of greatness. Secularising the religious tradition of the virtue of contact with holy

things, the period room or period house contains integrity because viewers believe they are in the presence of great objects, relics or artworks. In this way, meaning is constituted by sheer presence.<sup>89</sup>

The lack of material culture associated with Poe at the Poe House in Philadelphia prohibits the creation of an interpretive program that would enshrine the Great Man's relics. The Free Library of Philadelphia has also been hesitant to allow the Park Service to display items from the Richard Gimbel Poe Collection at the Poe House. However, the decision to leave the rooms bare also reveals much about the value placed on artifactual authenticity and the faith we invest in objects in conveying knowledge about their owner. Although the interpretive approach at the Poe House could be seen as a radical departure from the typical house-museum setting in which the Great Man's belongings take on an aura through sheer presence, the Poe House interpretation in fact exemplifies a reliance on this very approach, so much so that the absence of objects and evidence pointing to what kinds of objects may have been there has resulted in presenting an empty house. Since Poe left no material belongings behind, the "authentic," object-based approach has been to leave the place bare. As a result, and perhaps unwittingly, the National Park Service has created a space that contains great potential to stimulate the imagination and provoke visitors to contemplate the nothingness that both horrified and irresistibly attracted Poe in his writings and in his life. However, this nothingness must be shaped by a select number of interpretive themes that capture the fundamental paradoxes that lie at the core of Poe's person and work. For example, although Poe had a life-long desire to achieve a sense of belonging and familial acceptance, he also understood that the line between comfort and constraint is a thin one. In his tales Poe's frequent analogy for houses as "places of living entombment" expresses this ambivalence. The irony of

interpreting the life of a man who never owned a house in a house-museum would not be lost on Poe. Themes that explore the comfort of home versus the entrapment of the familiar, the relationship between the observer and the observed, and material poverty versus the wealth of one's imagination would be suitable for the Poe House, and could be expressed in a number of creative ways in temporary exhibits and in site installations.

The choice of presenting an empty space in a house-museum is as much a curatorial decision as displaying period rooms. However, the bareness at the Poe House is reduced to a citation of fact—that none of Poe's belongings has been discovered at the site—without consideration of what the space expresses about Poe's life and his literary legacy. However, a poverty of material culture need not preclude a rich, multi-layered reading of the site. Indeed, emptiness can be highly telling if it is framed by an interpretive narrative that corresponds to the concept of the space. The Anne Frank House in Amsterdam is an example of a house-museum that has been interpreted primarily as an empty space. The house has not been refurbished since 1944, when the Jewish families hiding there were betrayed and deported to concentration camps. There is a tension in the equanimity of the empty rooms—the tension of a tree that has grown too large for its plot, of life confined. In this instance, bareness conveys violence through absence and stores the past in its irredeemable emptiness.<sup>90</sup> As the official website for Radio Netherlands proclaims, “a lot has been left up to the visitor's imagination.”<sup>91</sup> The use of the imagination to understand the unimaginable or that which does not lend itself to translation, is a valid departure point for the Poe House as well. Poe's refuge from the constraints of his material existence was often in the world of his imagination. In fact, he created a home for himself in the spaces between his words. Overwhelmingly, Poe is

always present in his writing, gazing out between the lines, a thinly disguised *Doppelgänger* of his doomed heroes. The Poe House could sponsor temporary site-specific installations that take advantage of the emptiness of the house to create a space where one leaves “the space of one’s usual sensibilities.”<sup>92</sup> For example, artist Janet Cardiff often creates site-specific audio and video “Walks” that take visitors through a site by following directions and suggestions transmitted through headphones or by watching the screen of a camcorder. The following is a description of her work on the P.S.1 MoMA website:

Voices, footsteps, music, sounds of cars and gunshots make up a fictional soundtrack to an actual walk through real indoor and outdoor spaces. Cardiff’s works involve the conventions of cinema and science fiction and explore the complexity of subjectivity in today’s highly technological world, where the distinction between sensation and imagination continuously collapses. In Cardiff’s “Walks,” characters narrate dreamlike recollections of particular events, and refer to the participant’s physical surroundings. Shifting between past and present, memory and reality, Cardiff’s stories become a manipulation of the “real” and of a participant’s projections, fantasies and desires.<sup>93</sup>

The work of such an artist could aid in evoking the rich world of Poe’s imagination through physical contact with the house and its surroundings. The creation of some form of spatial, sensory and psychological dislocation in visitors could also help to address issues of displacement and exclusion in society, where the marginalization of the *Other* becomes a means for self-definition.<sup>94</sup>

Poe’s disenfranchisement and position outside of the American mainstream places him in opposition to the seat of authority represented by Independence Hall, situated a short distance away from the Poe House. Paradoxically, Poe’s continued search for artistic acceptance and financial stability, as well as his literal and metaphorical refusal to settle, provide a microcosm for the history of the United States: a history of uprooting,

settling, and staking out new territories. Although the romantic notion of the rugged individual is often reserved for the pioneer farmer or the urban entrepreneur, it is not uncommon to extend this idea to include a man of letters such as Poe. Poe succeeded in reinterpreting European literary traditions while simultaneously creating new genres that contributed to the American Canon, influencing succeeding generations of writers at home and abroad. His characters are both reminiscent of figures of the Romantic period and prefigurations of the twentieth-century existential anti-hero.<sup>95</sup> Some of Poe's heroes are two-dimensional figures that function as props in the plot, like Roderick Usher in "The Fall of the House of Usher;" others are deeply psychologized characters whose wanderings through desolate landscapes in search of self-discovery often lead to madness or death.

Many of Poe's tales are pretexts to unveil the world of appearances in order to understand the mystery and contradictions hidden within the human spirit. Similarly, as much as Poe's house is the subject of the museum's interpretation, it is also a medium for delivering a message. Although the Poe House is unfurnished—an apparent acknowledgement of the multitude of meanings that can be contained in the space—the interpretation of the house does not extend beyond the material existence of the building. It remains loyal to the idea of the house as an architectural artifact, but overlooks the capacity of the space to explore some of the themes of Poe's work such as the dialectics of interior and exterior; mind and body; and the vast intimate space contained within the human spirit versus the immensity of the universe. Within the context of a house, one can also contemplate the conflicting meanings associated with home and belonging, such as the comforts and constraints of conformity. The Poe House illustrates the difficult

process of presenting more than the furnished period room in order to reveal the real and symbolic structure of a house. The conversion of a house lacking material culture such as Poe's into a house-museum is a reminder that when we preserve a house we are not only preserving the physical aspects of the building. The house is also a framework that can be used to recount and illustrate certain facts and ideas; it is a backdrop against which we can preserve and celebrate Poe's literary legacy.



## Chapter Five: The House-Museum as Interactive Narrative or The Life of Objects

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*All that we see or seem  
Is but a dream within a dream.*<sup>96</sup>

For what else is this collection but a disorder to which habit has accommodated itself to such an extent that it can appear as order?<sup>97</sup>

The mirage never stops driving his gaze. But to be freed of it, looking elsewhere is not enough: his eye sees nothing in things save the absence of what he seeks.<sup>98</sup>

But just as one step will inevitably lead to next step, so it is that each thought inevitably follows from the previous thought, and... if we were to try to make an image of this process in our minds, a network of paths begins to be drawn, as in the human bloodstream (heart, arteries, veins, capillaries), or as in the image of a map (of city streets, for example, ... or even of roads, as in the gas station maps of roads that stretch, bisect, and meander across a continent), ... so that, in the end, we might safely say that we have been on a journey, and even if we do not leave our room, it has been a journey, and we might safely say that we have been somewhere, even if we don't know where it is.<sup>99</sup>

The Rosenbach Museum and Library is an example of the Collector's house-museum genre. Often the outcome of a private collector's desire to make his collection accessible to the public, Collector's house-museums evince a high level of personal influence on the contents and configuration of the domestic setting.<sup>100</sup> The significance of the Rosenbach Museum lies not only in its collections, but also in its association with the Rosenbach Brothers. Dr. Abraham Simon Wolf Rosenbach (1876-1952) was a world-renowned dealer in books and manuscripts, while his brother Philip Hyman Rosenbach (1865-1953) specialized in collecting fine and decorative arts. Together they operated a successful antiquarian business in Philadelphia and New York that helped to shape and feed the tastes of America's social and cultural elite. As stipulated by their will and provided for by the creation of a foundation, the Rosenbach Museum and Library was opened to the public in 1954. The brothers did not specify a mode of exhibition for the collections or any criteria for future acquisitions.<sup>101</sup> With the exception of some

collections that were acquired after the Rosenbachs' deaths, most of the holdings in the Rosenbach collection represent stock that was left over after the Rosenbach business was closed. In this respect, the character of the collections is varied and overwhelmingly represents both the individual tastes of the brothers and their clientele.

Because the Rosenbachs intended their house to be transformed into a museum after their deaths, the Rosenbach Museum has a different character than houses that were turned into house-museums for documentary or memorial purposes. In connection with their historical consciousness of their position of cultural authority, their primary motive for turning their house into a museum and library was the education of the public. This type of collector's house-museum appeared in western Europe and North America in the latter half of the nineteenth century and is distinguished from traditional museums in that the collection is framed by the collector's individual taste and educational intentions.<sup>102</sup> The Rosenbach Museum and Library is both a house-museum and a museum located in a house. It also functions as a research library, sharing with the public its extensive collection of rare books and manuscripts. The incorporation of the aesthetic ideals of the inhabitants into the display of the collections provides a framework for the interplay of objects of art, books, and decorative arts exhibited throughout the house. The mixed display of fine and decorative arts in the domestic interior distinguishes itself from traditional art and history museum exhibits in its approach to the house and the collections within as a unified cultural artifact.<sup>103</sup>

Removed from their context of origin, objects in a collection are given meaning by the fact of their collection and their arrangement by the collector. In this sense, the world of the collector represented by the interpretation of the Rosenbach collection is not

just that of the Rosenbach brothers themselves, but also of the museum curators. And to the degree that an exhibit is both a reflection of the identity of the curator and the curator's impressions of his/her audience, the interpretation of the Rosenbach Museum is an interactive narrative that depends on the self-inscription of its viewers.

Several intermingling narratives coexist under the roof of the Rosenbach Museum. The miniature universe contained within a book provides an analogy for the miniature cosmology of the museum, where the life stories of the collector brothers provide a backdrop for the acquisition histories of the objects in the museum collection, each of which reveals a unique story about its artistry, craftsmanship, and authorship. The interpretation of the collections can be read "cover to cover" or by skipping sections to concentrate on areas of particular interest.

The Rosenbach Museum is comprised of two four-story, contiguous townhouses in a residential neighborhood in the center of Philadelphia. The entrance to the Rosenbach Museum is through the Victorian townhouse at 2008 Delancey Street, adjacent and nearly identical to the original Rosenbach residence at 2010 Delancey Street. In 1998, the Rosenbach Museum and Library expanded by acquiring the building at 2008 Delancey Street, naming it after Maurice Sendak, whose entire collection of drawings and manuscripts resides within the museum. The museum carried out a five-year renovation and restoration project that connected the two building on each level, accommodated the insertion of an anterior stairwell, and made the building comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. The Sendak Building was also structurally reinforced in order to allow for the storage of books and other materials and retrofitted to accommodate office and program spaces for the museum. The removal of the entrance

from the original Rosenbach residence to the Sendak Building allows visitors an introduction to the museum previously not afforded.<sup>104</sup> Before the expansion, visitors entered the museum through the parlor of the Rosenbach residence, where they would receive a brief history of the Rosenbach brothers and their business. This situation was problematic due to the fact that visitors would sit on historic furniture while receiving the introduction, thereby compromising professional standards of conservation. Today, visitors are first encouraged to visit the exhibition gallery on the entrance level of the Sendak Building, which is designated for the exhibition of works related to the Rosenbach legacy either through their personal interests and acquaintanceships or through the theme of collecting. A recent exhibition featured in this space was “Devil with a Hammer in his Hand,” a tribute to the internationally-renowned iron artisan Samuel Yellin. Like the Rosenbachs, Yellin catered to the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American taste for old world motifs and cultural artifacts, crafting architectural elements and ornamentation inspired by medieval European motifs, among others. Yellin also designed a gate for the Rosenbach residence that hangs on the threshold of the vestibule of 2010 Delancey Street. The personal association between Yellin and the Rosenbachs, in addition to their business relationship, connects the Yellin exhibit to the Rosenbach Museum in multiple ways. Visitor exposure to exhibits highlighting the Rosenbachs’ cultural milieu, the breadth of their business relations, and the theme of collecting provides a compelling introduction to the rest of the museum.

After perusing the exhibits in this gallery at their own pace, visitors are taken on a docent-guided tour of the historic Rosenbach house-museum. The tour begins in a small side parlor of the Rosenbach residence with photographs of the Rosenbach family and

close relations. A portrait of the two brothers as young children hangs to one side of the room, facing a display case whose contents have yet to be determined by the curators. The entrance floor of the Rosenbach residence most closely resembles the configuration of an historic house-museum, with two fully furnished rooms that once served as parlor and dining room. The second floor, once the living quarters of Philip Rosenbach, has three changing exhibits rooms. One room is solely dedicated to the exhibition of drawings and manuscripts from the Maurice Sendak Collection. The two other rooms, the French Room and the Highlights Gallery, feature changing exhibits of items from the museum collections and items on loan from other institutions. The third floor, Dr. A.S.W. Rosenbach's former living quarters, contains two rooms that served as research library before the expansion of the museum and one room which features a permanent installation recreating the poet Marianne Moore's Greenwich Village living room.<sup>105</sup> In the corridor outside the Moore Room, a bookcase stores rare prints. The fourth floor, which served as servants quarters during the Rosenbachs' residence, is used for storage and office space and closed to the public.

The configuration of the furniture and objects of art on the entrance floor of the Rosenbach residence has been changed since the Rosenbachs' lifetime in order to accommodate visitor circulation and to aid the presentation of the interpretive narrative. During the tour, each object of art and furniture is described with respect to its art historical significance and in its connection to the Rosenbach estate. The spatial organization of the decorative and fine arts in the house is deliberate, guiding visitors down a main course that both recounts the personal and business history of the Rosenbachs, and forks into smaller paths that contain the histories of individual objects.

In contrast to traditional art and history museums, the objects in the Rosenbach Museum are not identified solely as representatives in an aesthetic sequence of style or in order to be traced back to a specific craftsman or period. Instead, the interpretation of the objects is analogous to prisms in a crystal chandelier: refracting light at varied lengths to illuminate different periods of history while simultaneously catching mirror images of one another on their reflective surfaces. Of course, objects do not catch glimpses of themselves in other objects; it is the collector who imposes a form of classification on the objects that results in intertextuality. Removed from their original context, the objects in the Rosenbach collection are recontextualized in an arrangement largely determined by the museum curators. In the parlor, an eighteenth-century English “looking-glass” decorated with *chinoiserie* faces a set of mid-nineteenth-century porcelain tea cups made in China for export to the Anglo-American market.<sup>106</sup> The tableau depicted on the wooden gilded frame of the mirror reflects a western perception of Asian motifs and demonstrates the eclecticism of European baroque ornamentation. The positioning of the mirror behind the table with the teacups juxtaposes western interpretation of Chinese ornamentation with Chinese self-parody for a western market. In its arrangement of disparate periods, styles and cultural influences into a single object, the eclecticism of the baroque itself translates into a form of collecting. We find a similar example of interconnectedness in the Marianne Moore Room, where a copy of Maurice Sendak’s *Nutshell Library* from her personal collection sits atop her writing desk. Sendak and Moore were friends and mutual admirers of one another’s work. The real and artificial display of interconnectedness between the objects is in some cases easily visible, whereas in others the curators interpret the idiosyncratic vision of the collector, reminding us that

no collection is ever complete—a perpetual fragment of an imaginary collection—and that every collection can serve as a metaphor for the representation of one’s self in the world and the world within oneself.<sup>107</sup> Susan Stewart writes that the collection stands for the world “first, in the metonymic displacement of part for whole, item for context; and second, [in] the invention of a classification scheme which will define space and time in such a way that the world is accounted for by the elements of the collection.”<sup>108</sup> A collection may conform to traditional standards of arrangement such as type, period of manufacture, and medium, but it also tells a story about the collector himself. The collection and its arrangement is a reflection of the collector’s taste, history, environment, and many other aspects that inform who we are, what we choose to collect, and how we decide to arrange it. As Edgar Allan Poe once declared about the relationship between a writer and his work: “The supposition that the book of an author is a thing apart from the author’s *Self* is, I think, ill founded.”<sup>109</sup> In the same way that a collection takes the shape of the collector’s gaze, it is also a metaphor for the universe contained within his mind. The collector’s self-inscription into the collection coincides with a reciprocal pull exerted by the objects on the collector. The propensity to make sense of the world by means of placing things in sequenced narratives of origin and production is accompanied by an equally manufactured inscription of the narrative of the individual onto the world.<sup>110</sup>

Objects in the fine and decorative arts collection of Philip Rosenbach are subdivided by categories including period of manufacture, culture, place of origin, and medium, whereas books, manuscripts, and broadsides are additionally classified according to genre and physical format. Although this classification is traditional, the

curators of the museum recognize the difficulty of placing an object under a single category. As one of the panels in the Highlights Gallery explains:

The divisions and their component categories are a means of organizing this gallery. It would be merely simplistic to suggest that each object fits only a single category or that these form an exclusive description of the collections. Although the categories are traditional, it is important to remember that the objects were collected in a more traditional time, but with an expansive outlook that, in the present, welcomes flexible and relevant avenues of interpretation.<sup>111</sup>

The acknowledgement of the interpretive potential of the collections has implications for recent discussions on collection display. The social and historical factors that motivate the acquisition of certain objects increasingly inform the study of collections.<sup>112</sup> Interpreting collections within the framework of the factors that influence their formation allows an ongoing dialogue with the past through self-conscious reappraisal of its legacy.

Depending on visitors' expressed interests, Rosenbach docents may focus on the decorative arts, the history of the Rosenbach family or business, and the social history of Philadelphia. According to Curator and Director of Collections Judith Guston, visitors are encouraged to express their particular interests to the docents guiding the tours in order to customize their museum experience.<sup>113</sup> The Highlights Gallery on the second floor of the Rosenbach residence was created to exhibit objects from the collection in which visitors have expressed an interest. Written and verbal requests have resulted in a temporary exhibits space featuring books, manuscripts, and other objects from the collection. The space was designed with display cases that are relatively mobile and flexible for ease of installation. Originally the first exhibition gallery in the museum, the room that is now the Highlights Gallery was dedicated on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the



museum in 2004. It was conceived as a “bookend” to the tour, a point at which visitors could collect their thoughts and view some of the lesser-seen holdings of the museum. Explanatory panels on the walls of this space describe the classification of the objects in the collection. The wide scope of Dr. Rosenbach’s book and manuscript collection as well as his brother Philip’s varied taste in objects of art and decoration is described here. The book and manuscript collection is broadly divided into the categories of Americana, English, American, and Continental Literature, Book Arts, Incunabula, Maps, Broad­sides, Judaica, Children’s Literature, and Rosenbachiana. The last of these categories hold documents from the Rosenbach Company archives, including stock files, purchase and sales records, and correspondence. Since the Rosenbachs were very influential in the American antiquarian book trade, the documents from the company archives represent an important source of information about the formation of other collections, and, in general, about the American book trade in the twentieth century.

The French Room on the same floor is also a gallery space for changing exhibits and contains a large bookcase with mostly Continental Literature. Recently, an exhibit entitled “Picturing Women” was installed in collaboration with the Library Company of Philadelphia and Bryn Mawr College. The exhibit focused on the representation of women in a variety of media, including newspapers, personal accounts, and visual arts.

The second floor is also home to the permanent Maurice Sendak Gallery. The museum began its relationship with Sendak in the 1950s, when he came to the Rosenbach Library to view early editions of Melville.<sup>114</sup> In tacit thanks to Melville’s role in attracting Sendak to the Rosenbach, a bookcase containing Nathaniel Hawthorne’s copy of *Moby Dick* stands in the Sendak Gallery. This fortuitous visit eventually led Sendak to

choose the Rosenbach Museum as the repository for all of his drawings and manuscripts. In the 1970s, Sendak began to place his works in the museum, where he now serves on the Board of Trustees. Currently on display are the mock-ups and preliminary drawings for Sendak's reptilian alphabet book *Alligators All Around*. In addition to being a renowned illustrator and author of children's books, Sendak is also a collector. In 2003, the Rosenbach Museum held two exhibits featuring items from Sendak's personal collections. "An Infinitude of Mouses" exhibited Mickey Mouse memorabilia from the artist's collection, while an exhibit entitled "Enchanted Tableaus" featured nineteenth-century photographs from Sendak's collection of early photography.

The former living quarters of Dr. Rosenbach on the third floor of the Rosenbach Museum house some of the museum's British and American Literature, Americana, and Judaica collections. Two spacious rooms that served as the museum's reading room before it was moved to the modernized Sendak Building, display wall-to-wall books in ceiling-high glass cases. The first room is dedicated to literature from the British Isles, displaying, among many others, James Joyce's original manuscript for *Ulysses*.<sup>115</sup> The books represent a variety of periods, and are displaced from their original configuration. A portrait of Dr. Rosenbach hangs above the mantelpiece with two late eighteenth-century globes on either side. On the mantelpiece, a bust of Keats overlooks a horizontal display case in the center of the room that contains changing exhibits from the collection. The room also houses two reading chairs designed by Dr. Rosenbach, as well as another reading chair in green leather, mahogany and brass that resembles a bird with outstretched wings. Aptly named "The Fighting Cock Chair," this item dates to the latter half of the eighteenth century. Surrounding the room on all three sides are miniature

papier-mâché replicas of William Shakespeare's dwellings and places of significance such as the Globe Theatre, produced in the early eighteenth century. The English Literature collection was a lifelong passion of Dr. Rosenbach, who received his doctorate in English Literature from the University of Pennsylvania in 1901.<sup>116</sup> The room immediately adjacent to this room largely contains books from the museum's Americana, American Literature, and Judaica collections, as well as a massive wood table that served scholars and the general public when the space was still used as a reading room.

The Rosenbach Museum's installations of a world within a world within another world are analogous to the Romantic tales of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in which a traveler ambling along a familiar landscape happens upon a dense forest that mysteriously beckons him to enter. The narrator of such a tale could be sitting in a parlor like the Rosenbachs,' where a friend recounts the story of a fellow traveler he met on one of his journeys. In turn, the traveler he meets tells him of the time he was drawn into a forest while traversing the countryside, a narrative that itself recedes into the margins as the tapestry of the story unfurls into yet another tale. The interpretation of the Rosenbach Museum resembles such a narrative, intertwining seemingly random threads to form a layered text whose author disappears and reappears while one moves through the rooms of the house.

The tempo set by the alternating narrative planes in the Rosenbach Museum offers visitors several levels of engagement in the museum experience. The permanent installation of the modernist poet Marianne Moore's Greenwich Village living room playfully blurs the line between life and art and original and copy. In 1970s, Marianne Moore began a relationship with the Rosenbach Museum that, like Maurice Sendak,

eventually resulted in her choosing the museum as the repository for all of her works. In her will she stipulated the recreation of her living room in the museum. Approaching the room from the corridor, one is faced with a black-and-white photograph of the room taken before it was dismantled and reinstalled at the Rosenbach Museum. The similarity in scale between the original room and the simulated room results in a nearly identical recreation of the poet's life- and work-space. Another black-and-white photograph of the original space taken from a different angle is situated within the room. The doubletake of viewing the representation of the real room in the two-dimensional medium of the photograph while standing in the here-and-now of the simulated room blurs the distinction between copy and original.

The nearly photographic recreation of Marianne Moore's living room is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. The verisimilitude of the room is familiar to visitors of house-museums with its equation of one's room with one's inner world. The profusion of details, from the artist's typewriter to her personal collection of art, underlines the space as the poet's miniature cosmology. However, the room's location within a Victorian house refurbished in the Federal style which was then furnished with the Rosenbachs' eclectic furniture and objects of art serves to defamiliarize visitors, allowing them to see the installation for the stage set that it is.

The convention of viewing one's room as one's mind is neither challenged nor condoned by the Marianne Moore installation in the Rosenbach Museum. The two black-and-white photographs taken of the original room from different angles cleverly compare the static moment captured by the camera with the installation of time represented by the meticulous recreation of the room in this space. It is a space in which time has stopped or

perhaps moves at a slower pace than our own.<sup>117</sup> By its static nature and emphasis on the finite, the installation of Moore's room invokes infinity. The room is no longer the dream space of the poet, "its walls ... like the skin of some second body around [her]."<sup>118</sup> Instead it is we who are the dreamers, standing in a space where the fleeting moment can be preserved in perpetuity.

In April 2004, the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia opened an exhibit entitled "R is for Rosenbach: A Primer for a Museum at 50." Using the experience of leafing through a dictionary as their departure point, the designers of the exhibit arranged objects from the museum's collection under thematic headings, such as "U is for Under" and "W is for Wander." However, unlike the walnut and the walrus which share little more than the same page in the dictionary, the objects in the exhibit were organized according to their formal or thematic association with twenty-six alphabetically organized concepts. So, for example, whereas a dummy book of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* and a seventeenth century *Haggadah* with the first published map of the exodus from Egypt reside within the concept of 'Wander,' "E is for Eyes" features, among other things, a Babylonian votive amulet resembling an eye, a pair of pince-nez bifocals belonging to Dr. A.S.W. Rosenbach, a photograph of James Joyce wearing an eye patch, and John Tenniel's illustration of the *Jabberwock with eyes of flame* for Lewis Carroll's *Through the looking-glass*. For the exhibit, larger than life reproductions of pages from the dictionary were hung on the walls and from the ceiling of the gallery space, recalling the haphazard plastering of broadsides on city streets. Below the seemingly chaotic pages of the dictionary, the objects were arranged and labeled in Plexiglas and wood display cases, each a curiosity cabinet and a miniature

cosmology in its own right. Appended to each case was a manila folder with the letter and word it represented printed in red stencil typeface. Inside each folder was a description of each of the objects, and some historical or anecdotal information relating to them. Some descriptions cross-referenced objects in other cabinets reflecting, perhaps, the curators' desire to convey the intertextuality of the objects in the collection and the impossibility of "capturing" a single description that would allow one-to-one classification. Although Joseph Conrad's 1911 copy of *Under Western Eyes* is displayed under "U is for Under," we are referred to "D is for Doodle," "K is for Kin," and "S is for Secret" for additional interpretations. The description for "U is for Under" demonstrates the associative organization of the objects:

It's all about perspective, it seems. Conrad's narrator, a westerner observing Russian character, watches as the Russian protagonist struggles with the balance between means and ends in political movements (U7) ... as a Polish expatriate, the author examines this topic under his own westernized eastern eyes. In Beardsley's unfinished tale (U6)[*Under the hill: a romantic novel*, (1896?)], two worlds are implied: one erotic and under the earth, ... the other the world of Rome that withholds forgiveness only to be surprised by divine forgiveness in the form of sprouting flowers. Strange mushrooms, among other things, greet Alice as she finds herself underground (U2) [facsimile of *Alice's Adventure's Underground* (1886)] ... while the world seen by goldfish from under the ice (U5) [Christopher Morley's *The Goldfish Under the Ice* (1932) illustrated by Kurt Wiese] offers a different perspective from below. Dylan Thomas's characters—here the undertaker under the bedclothes—try to understand their lives in a town found (U1), under the shadow of *Milk Wood*. One text hides below the cover of the other in Bonaventure's *Meditationes* (U3), an example of what's called a "palimpsest."<sup>119</sup>

In connection to this exhibit and in recognition of National Poetry Month, the museum invited twenty-six poets to visit the exhibit and compose poems inspired by the objects or words under each letter of the alphabet. At the end of the month, the poets reconvened to the museum and read their poems before an audience of their peers,

museum members and staff, and the general public. The diversity of interests and styles represented by the different poets combined with the associative nature of the task resulted in a performance in which a letter or a word or an object acted as a trigger that unleashed a set of images, meanings and sounds that decontextualized and then recontextualized the original signifier, creating an apt analogy for the entropic vision of the collector. Whereas choosing ideas and words corresponding to the letters of the alphabet acknowledges a pre-existing mode of ordering, the arrangement of the objects according to some seemingly whimsical formal and/or thematic connection to the chosen word or ideas forces the visitors to try and make *sense* of the objects and the relationships between the objects for themselves.<sup>120</sup> The realization that the selection and ordering of the objects is subjective, and therefore that content can be read in a number of different ways calls attention to the objects as a medium for delivering a message. By emphasizing the prismatic quality of meaning harbored in objects, the exhibit questions the finality and *authority* implicit in the narratives of ordered arrangements of objects and invites the visitors to inscribe their own meanings and images into and in between the objects. The invitation to participate is most explicit under “D is for Doodle,” where a pencil hanging from the display case calls visitors to make their own doodles on the wooden base of the case. In addition to exploring the production of meaning in the microcosms of the personal and the public museum collection, the exhibit provides an opportunity for the Rosenbach Museum to display a selection of objects from its collection in a frankly fun manner.

In “Unpacking My Library,” Walter Benjamin wrote of book collecting that “the collector’s passion borders on the chaos of memories.”<sup>121</sup> A collection of objects

authenticated by the past can serve as a mnemonic that helps to order the strands of memory. The spatial organization of the museum, with its arrangement of objects and sequence of display, can act as a collective memory device by organizing history into discrete periods.<sup>122</sup> The removal of objects from their context of origin results in a loss of the marginal, a background of details and inconsistencies that create patterns when viewed from a sufficient temporal and spatial distance. However, given the continuation of culture, the distance is never superlative, and given the scale of the human life span, the furthest distance is too large to comprehend. The sadness of Shelley's "Ozymandias, King of Kings" derives from the realization of this ephemerality of culture, from the impossibility of transcending the whole of the universe through time and space.<sup>123</sup> As Christine Boyer writes in *The City of Collective Memory*, the fiction on which the museum is built is that a fragment stands for the whole.<sup>124</sup> The museum promises transcendence through metonymic representation of part for whole. As Susan Stewart concludes, "it is this very desire of part for whole which both animates narrative and, in fact, creates the illusion of the real."<sup>125</sup> The membrane weaving decontextualized objects into spatial and temporal frameworks is the narrative of history, borne from the unattainability of a complete collection. The Rosenbach Museum superimposes the narrative of the collection onto the narrative of history. Objects are both classified according to type (period, style, medium) and displayed to tell the story of the collector.<sup>126</sup> The connective tissue between individual objects is the fact of their acquisition by the Rosenbachs, their assimilation into a collection which itself is a fragment of a larger whole.



By inscribing the objects in his collection into the narrative of the collection, the collector becomes a creator and attains a certain transcendence. The narrative of the collection grants it a closure that can accommodate further additions without disrupting the order of things. Susan Stewart elaborates:

Narrative ... seeks to “realize” a certain formulation of the world. Hence we can see the many narratives that dream of the inanimate-made-animate as symptomatic of all narrative’s desire to invent a realizable world, a world which “works.” In this sense, every narrative is a miniature and every book a microcosm, for such forms always seek to finalize, bring closure to, a totality or a model.<sup>127</sup>

The transformation of the object in the world into the object in the collection corresponds to the animate-made-inanimate. The installation of Marianne Moore’s living room in the Rosenbach Museum no longer represents a lived-in-space, because it no longer moves at the pace of everyday life. Rather, it inhabits a different temporal dimension in which the objects in the room become props in a discrete, miniaturized world. Through their inclusion in the collection, the objects have lost their use and exchange value, but they have been reanimated as props in the narrative of Marianne Moore’s life. In the collection, destruction of context is the threshold through which transcendence is achieved. During the poetry reading that accompanied the exhibit “R is for Rosenbach,” poet Eleanor Wilner read a poem entitled “Z is for Zoë.” The poem captures the cycle of the animate-made-inanimate which is *reanimated* in the poet’s imagination and the collector’s day-dream:

Z is for Zoë

Z begins zoë, and zoë means life  
(well, it does if you're Greek)  
DNA to Z, life copies itself, and still, is unique:  
for instance, take Blake, with his magical pencil,

his swans swim in ether, though ether is neither  
here nor quite air, and still life goes on, unless it is Still Life,  
an image that's placed in a Rosenbach case, displayed under glass  
for your gaze to command it: stay lion, stay leopard,  
intaglio of stone, so sadly unmoving, like flies caught  
in amber are zoë no more; take this snake  
made of metal: a serpent inert, oxymoronic  
like Snow White, sexually ripe though quite catatonic;  
or the buffalo sizzling in William Cook's poem, cut  
and dried on the metrical grid, and still frying, forever  
well done; or consider the fish caught on paper  
exactly, out of the swim and into the etching,  
in Buffon's compendium of life  
never ending, all kept undercover by a master  
engraver, the flavor of life in a hard candy wrapper;  
and look! a grasshopper of brass or time-blackened copper,  
so cunningly faux, but unable to hop, and here  
come the real toads from imaginary gardens,  
more Marianne than she might imagine,  
the soft flop of her toads can be heard in the gallery,  
as they hop, case to case, regarding the lot, and  
seeing this zoë trapped under glass, and being  
real toads and not mine to command, nor Marianne's  
anymore, they head for the exit, and are gone out the door.<sup>128</sup>

## Chapter Six: Conclusion

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For the house furnishes us dispersed images and a body of images at the same time. In both cases, I shall prove that imagination augments the value of reality.<sup>129</sup>

In attempting to create a coherent product, the curators of a house-museum must present visitors with a logical sequence of information that aids the audience in internalizing the main ideas or themes projected by the presentation. A museum will not leave visitors with a lasting message if it does not organize information relating to the subject matter into ideas that can be readily embedded into the interpretation. These ideas are what the managers and curators of a site hope the audience retains after the reality of the site itself recedes in memory. Like a literary text, the site is both real and immaterial; it is tangible in the sense that it occupies space, but it is also a medium for delivering an idea or a message. Visiting an historic site such as a house-museum combines the *hereness* of being on site with the *thereness* of imagining a different dimension of time. Visitors hope to assimilate, albeit indirectly, some aspect relating to the domestic lives of the house's inhabitants that they cannot glean from other media. A house-museum that commemorates the lives of writers, artists, and other individuals of cultural importance must endeavor to combine the formal aspects of the presentation (the physical and social dimensions of the domestic setting) with the main theme of the occupants' cultural significance. If a poet is at home in his poetry and if a collector inscribes himself in his collection, then we must search for them not only where they enacted the rituals of everyday life but also where their intellectual and spiritual lives took shape. The three

sites analyzed in this study reflect different approaches to communicating the cultural significance of their subjects.

Both the Emily Dickinson Museum and the Poe House rely on the *hereness* factor to attract visitors and convey the importance of the writers. Visitors are enticed by the promise of having an “authentic” experience, of being involved with the *genius loci* of the site.<sup>130</sup> This is why the sites are located where they are—in the spaces that were “witnesses” to the intersection of the domestic and intellectual aspects of the writers’ lives. In contrast, the Rosenbach Museum interpretation emphasizes that the house is merely a “stage set” that allows the narration of the stories of the collectors and their collections. The house in which the collections reside is of secondary importance to the arrangement of the collection within the installation of the Rosenbach brothers’ domestic life.

The fundamental difference between the two genres of house-museums represented by the three sites in this study is the genesis of the interpretive narrative presented by the Great Man Shrine and the Collector’s House: in the former, the significance of the objects is generated by means of their participation in the interpretive narrative. So, for example, the desk at which Emily Dickinson or Marianne Moore sat attains significance by the fact of its use by the poet. In the case of the house-museum devoted to the exhibition of the collector, objects also derive significance from the very fact of their collection, but they also aid in the creation of the narrative of the collection. Most of the objects and books in the Rosenbach brothers’ collection have a past—a story to tell about their context of origin, their previous ownership, and the Rosenbachs’ reason for acquiring them. At the same time, by being part of a larger collection the objects lose

their contextual meaning and become meaningful in relation to other objects in the collection. The arrangement of the English looking-glass in the Rosenbach parlor decorated with *chinoiserie* next to a set of Chinese teacups designed for the western market, tells a story about European trade with China and the perceptions and cross-influences on both sides. The narrative of the collection is superimposed on the narrative of history. Both genres of house-museums promise contact with “the real thing,” whether it be the aura of Edgar Allan Poe or Nathaniel Hawthorne’s copy of *Moby Dick*. In the Collector’s House, the objects also tend to be the primary message of display. The justification of their exhibition lies in their authentication by the past.<sup>131</sup> In the Great Man Shrine, the objects lend authenticity to the past, and, in general, act as props in the narrative. Similarly, the Emily Dickinson Museum objectifies its subject by making the poet a prop in the story of the Dickinson family.

In the Emily Dickinson Museum, the poet’s home life serves as a departure point for the interpretation of her family’s political, social, and cultural aspirations and achievements. Although the ostensible purpose of the museum is to leave visitors with a greater understanding of the poet’s cultural context and an appreciation of her work, the interpretation floods the visitors’ senses with a dense material culture and familial context, leaving the more significant story of Dickinson’s creativity and literary contribution ill-defined. The Emily Dickinson Museum functions more as a social-historical museum that commemorates the lives of prominent Amherst citizens than it does as a site of artistic pilgrimage. Instead of incorporating Dickinson’s cultural and familial context into the narrative of her life and work, the museum does the reverse,

primarily using Dickinson's existence as a point from which to interpret the lives of her family members.

In addition, the museum interpretation does not address Dickinson's artistic isolation as a product of her cultural milieu, nor does it place the poet's literary endeavors within the context of the work of her literary peers, allowing visitors to situate her in the American Canon. Dickinson's isolation from the public realm is explained as a personality quirk rather than as a reflection of her position outside the mainstream as a woman and as a poet. In this instance, failure to address past social inequalities or to analyze relationships of power in the interpretation may be seen as a perpetuation of these dynamics in the present.<sup>132</sup>

Allegorized by its metonymical relation to the public sphere, the private realm of the house is meant to reflect the political and social aspirations of society at large. The abstraction of the world from the individual domestic experience imbues the displayed objects with a signifying power beyond their own material existence. Coming into contact with authentic artifacts can be a moving experience precisely because it presents visitors with the opportunity to leave the world of mundane sensibilities behind by entering into the dream space of the collector/curator/writer. If not our imagination, what is it that renders this contact with the relics of the "Great Ones" such a moving experience? The experience of the site cannot be attributed solely to the aura of the objects; our receptiveness to what we imagine the objects represent also plays a role. Objects do not speak for themselves. Singly, they cannot convey their significance. As a member of an ensemble, however, an object helps create a framework in which to contextualize facts and ideas. Didactic biographical presentations tend to fail in house-

museums because the interpretation is divorced from the medium of presentation—the house. Similarly, a house cannot talk for itself. For example, visitors to the Poe House who do not take the ranger-led tour are likely to understand relatively little about Poe’s domestic life and how it relates to his literary output.

In spite of the fact that the administrators and managers of the Poe House regard the structure of the house as secondary to the interpretation of Poe’s literary significance, remaining loyal to notions of artifactual authenticity has proven to be the guiding force behind the interpretation of the space. National Park Service standards for re-furnishing historic houses require that there be physical or documentary evidence of the building’s contents that allows for an accurate portrayal of its interiors. The lack of such evidence at the Poe House has led to the current interpretation of the building as an empty space. Although the decision to choose an empty space over a conjecturally re-furnished space was motivated by concerns over material authenticity, the resulting interpretation of the house has resulted in interiors that do not resemble any of the building’s former configurations. However, the current interpretation of the space also creates a sense of defamiliarization in visitors by thwarting their expectation of seeing period rooms in a house-museum. This is a promising, if unexpected, result of leaving the house unfurnished; by nudging visitors out of their passive role as observer-consumers the Poe House can set the stage for installations and other performances that explore some of the themes of Poe’s work and life, such as belonging and exclusion in society, the role of fantasy and imagination in everyday life, among many others. However, this kind of a program would necessitate a different approach to the fabric of the site. In addition to regarding the buildings in the Poe House complex as documents of social history, the

Park Service might consider them more as a venue for exploring different *rooms* in Poe's literary and metaphorical houses.

The ranger-led tour of the Poe House proper effectively uses the bare rooms to evoke the uncanny atmosphere in some of Poe's mystery stories and tales of horror. Reference is also made to architectural features in the house that may have influenced Poe's writings. However, in the popular imagination, the narratives of Poe's life and literary achievement tend to get conflated with his specter. Whereas the site could be used to explore some of the complex themes of Poe's life and work, the interpretation is limited to recreating a "Poe-like feeling" in the space.

In addition to audience expectations, the interpretation of a house-museum is also often influenced by the circumstances of its entry into the public domain. The Dickinson Homestead was acquired by Amherst College on account of its literary significance, but also because Emily Dickinson's grandfather was a founding member of the college. The interpretation of the Rosenbach Museum and Library also reflects its sponsorship. The educational ideals of the Rosenbach brothers are still evident in the interpretation of the Rosenbach Museum. Unlike the Dickinson Museum and Poe House, the Rosenbach Museum did not belong to a writer and was transformed into a museum in accordance with the wishes of its former occupants. Although they were not artists, artisans, or writers, it may be argued that the Rosenbach brothers' talent was their taste. The exhibition of their collections in the context of their eclectic, and, at times, playful aesthetic ideals lends a social-historical framework to the presentation of the objects and also serves to relativize the authority implicit in the display of objects in a museum. The associative nature of the arrangement of fine and decorative arts objects within the



Rosenbach Museum kindles the realization in visitors that they, too, are active participants in generating meaning in and between different objects. The text of the Rosenbach Museum succeeds in its ability to accommodate several different narratives that are connected to one another through literary or personal associations, as well as through the passion of collecting. Whereas the museum's primary focus is the exhibition of the fine and decorative arts and book collections, by framing the collections in the aesthetic ideals of its founders, the museum also succeeds in telling the story of the Rosenbachs. By retaining the original unity of home and collection, the interpretation of the Rosenbach Museum ensures that the collector's personal ideals and tastes are better explained. Punctuated by stories about the acquisition of individual objects in the collection, the brothers' life stories provide the scaffolding for the art historical information. As a narrative of private life produced for reception and consumption by the public, the interpretation of a house reveals as much about the identity of its audience as it does about the personae of its former inhabitants. The interpretation of the Rosenbach Museum and Library both thematically and formally relies on the self-inscription of the visitors.

The Rosenbach Museum demonstrates that a site can accommodate many stories without compromising the legibility of the message that is meant to be conveyed by the site. How effectively the message is communicated depends on visitors' pre-existing knowledge and beliefs. In order to provoke critical thinking and enhance visitors' comprehension of the subject matter, site managers and curators must first have a basic understanding of their audiences through surveys, visitor interviews, and other similar means.<sup>133</sup> Whereas every site necessarily offers a share of the familiar, an element of the

unexpected in the interpretation also must be included to encourage visitors to abandon their usual role as passive listeners. In the passive mode, visitors absorb information, often rediscovering the already familiar.<sup>134</sup> In the case of the Poe House, one could cite the reiteration of Poe's eccentric tendencies as a confirmation of a widely known fact about the writer. By virtue of the fact that it is easily understood, information such as this tends to reflect mainstream attitudes and to support the status quo. Visitors are compelled to participate and make sense of what they are seeing and hearing when a seemingly established truth is challenged. For example, Poe's reputation as a dark, fantastical, and off-balance individual could be countered with a script or installation that highlights Poe as a skilled and meticulous craftsman, dedicated to achieving formal unity in his writing structure.

Ultimately, a house provides multiple narrative possibilities. The house-museums studied here attempt to accommodate both the text of domestic life and the literary legacy of the house's former inhabitants. The success of each of the three sites depends on their ability to abstract from the material reality of a house the broader humanistic themes that can be found in the recollection of individual lives and in our collective literary tradition.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1982), 89.

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper the author has chosen to insert a dash between the words *house* and *museum* in order to emphasize the idea of house-museums as a subcategory of museums rather as mere “museumified” or preserved houses.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the domestic installations of artist Ilya Kabakov, see Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic, 2001), 117-18; 309-26.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 63.

<sup>5</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, 63.

<sup>7</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 319.

<sup>8</sup> In contrast to Edgar Allan Poe, who earned a living as a writer and editor, Emily Dickinson did not publish her poetry during her lifetime. Her position as a creator in the production cycle of literature refers to the posthumous publication of her work.

<sup>9</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, xi. As Stewart notes, the mechanical reproduction of books, creates an a priori “disjunction between book as object and book as idea.”

<sup>10</sup> Charlotte Smith, “The House Enshrined: Great Man and Social History House Museums in Australia and the United States,” Ph.D. thesis, University of Canberra, 2002, quoted in: Linda Young, “A Woman’s Place is in the House ... Museum: Interpreting Women’s Histories in House Museums,” *Open Museum Journal: Interpreting Historic House Museums* 5, (July 2002): 6. All reference to house-museum types will refer to the typology developed by Charlotte Smith unless otherwise noted.

<sup>11</sup> Linda Young, “A Woman’s Place is in the House...Museum,” 6.

<sup>12</sup> Jane Greengold, “What Might Have Been and What Has Been—Fictional Public Art and the Real Past,” in *Past Meets Present: Essays about Historic Interpretation and Public Audiences*, ed. Jo Blatti (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 58.

<sup>13</sup> Marilyn R. Chandler, *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), quoted in: M. Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1998), 26, 133.

<sup>15</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, quoted in: Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory*, 26, 133.

<sup>16</sup> Azade Seyhan, *Writing Outside the Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 12.

<sup>17</sup> John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *The Necessity for Ruins and Other Topics* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), quoted in: Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory*, 308.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Wallace. “History Museums in the United States,” 137-161; Patrick H. Butler III, “Past, Present, and Future: The Place of the House Museum in the Museum Community,” in *Interpreting Historic House Museums*, ed. Jessica Foy Donnelly (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002), 19-34. Information about history of historic preservation in the United States comes from Butler, and Wallace.

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<sup>19</sup> Charles B Hosmer, Jr., *Presence of the Past: A History of the Historic Preservation Movement in the United States Before Williamsburg* (New York: Putnam, 1965), quoted in: Michael Wallace, "History Museums in the United States," 138.

<sup>20</sup> Gerald George. "Historic House Museum Malaise: A Conference Considers What's Wrong," in *History News* 57, no. 4. (Autumn 2002): 1. <<http://www.aaslh.org/images/hhouseart.pdf>> 20 March 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Gerald George, "Historic Property Museums: What Are They Preserving?" 2.

<sup>22</sup> Marilyn R. Chandler, *Dwelling in the Text*, 13.

<sup>23</sup> Kevin Walsh, *The Representation of the Past: Museums and Heritage in the Post-Modern World* (London: Routledge, 1992), 31.

<sup>24</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, 116.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Wallace, "History Museums in the United States," in *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, eds. Susan Porter Benson, Steven Brier, Roy Rosenzweig (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 140.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), quoted in: Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory*, 310.

<sup>28</sup> Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1997), 212.

<sup>29</sup> Linda Young, "House Museums in Australia," *Public History Review* 3, (1994): 178.

<sup>30</sup> See Gerald George, "Historic Property Museums: What Are They Preserving?" *Preservation Forum*, (Summer 1989): 2-5.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Michael J. Ettema, "History Museums and the Culture of Materialism," 66.

<sup>33</sup> Patricia West, ed., *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Wallace, "The Politics of Public History," in *Past Meets Present: Essays about Historic Interpretation and Public Audiences*, ed. Jo Blatti (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 42-3.

<sup>36</sup> Barbara Melosh and Christina Simmons, "Exhibiting Women's History," in *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, eds. Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 203.

<sup>37</sup> Jessica Foy Donnelly, ed., *Interpreting Historic House Museums* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002), 1-2.

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<sup>38</sup> The phrase ‘Warm Parlour of the Past’ is borrowed from Anne Bickford, “Disquiet in the Warm Parlour of the Past,” in CRASTE, *History and Cultural Resources Project: Seminar Papers*, Canberra, 1986, 159, quoted in: Linda Young “House Museums in Australia,” 181.

<sup>39</sup> Jane Austen, *Emma* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), quoted in: Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, eds. *The Ideology of Conduct* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), 96.

<sup>40</sup> Lydia Maria Child, *The American Frugal Housewife: Dedicated to Those Who Are Not Ashamed of Economy*, 1833, reprint ( Bedford MA: Applewood, 1969), 1. This book is available for sale in the Emily Dickinson Museum gift shop.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude*, 89.

<sup>42</sup> Czeslaw Milosz, quoted in: Christopher Benfey, *Emily Dickinson: Lives of a Poet* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1986), 9.

<sup>43</sup> Marilyn R. Chandler, *Dwelling in the Text*, chapters 1 and 11.

<sup>44</sup> Christopher Benfey, *Emily Dickinson*, 32.

<sup>45</sup> The primary basis for evaluation of the interpretation of the Emily Dickinson Museum is an analysis of the guided tour through the two houses. Given that each tour guide writes his/her own script, it is possible that some of the author’s criticism regarding the focus of the interpretation may be more applicable to one script than to another. However, since the parameters of each script are predetermined by the mission statement, themes, and suggested story-line provided by the museum, and each script undergoes a final review before it is approved for the public, it is assumed that if some differences exist, they do not interrupt the general consistency of the visitor experience.

<sup>46</sup> “Mission,” <<http://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/mission.html>> (25 June 2004).

<sup>47</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, 27.

<sup>48</sup> Jane Wald, Associate Director, Emily Dickinson Museum, conversation with author, 17 March 2004.

<sup>49</sup> See National Park Service/Organization of American Historians, *Exploring a Common Past: Interpreting Women’s History in the National Park Service* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1996); and Gerald George, “Historic Property Museums: What Are They Preserving?” for a discussion of the limited representation of women at historic sites in the United States.

<sup>50</sup> Linda Young, “A Woman’s Place is in the House ... Museum,” 3.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>52</sup> The Emily Dickinson Museum’s persistence in “domesticating” the creative influences of the poet is not inconsistent with the tendency of society to discount female genius. If Dickinson was never published during her lifetime, this was in no small part due to her being a woman.

<sup>53</sup> Jane Wald, conversation with author.

<sup>54</sup> The three main themes of the Emily Dickinson Museum are: 1) Emily Dickinson was a poet of extraordinary ability and output; 2) Emily Dickinson’s internal musings, manifested through her poetry and letters, were most significantly affected by personal relationships, a superior education, and an intense intellectual curiosity about religion and the natural world; and 3) The Dickinson family was a prominent family, its fortunes intimately connected with that of the community and the larger social, political, and

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economic climate. The family's social and intellectual ambitions affected and informed their lives in significant ways.

<sup>55</sup> "Themes for Introductory Tour of the Emily Dickinson Museum," Leaflet, Emily Dickinson Museum, Amherst, Massachusetts, January 2004.

<sup>56</sup> *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986), quoted in: Christopher Benfey, *Emily Dickinson: Lives of a Poet*, 30.

<sup>57</sup> E.T.A. Hoffmann, *Tales of Hoffmann* (London: Pan Books, 1952), 101.

<sup>58</sup> Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," 51: 1324-26 *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum of the Printed Poems*, 3 vols., ed. Scully Bradley et al. (New York: New York University Press, 1980), quoted in Bradley J. Stiles, *Emerson's Contemporaries and Kerouac's Crowd: A Problem of Self-Location* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 2003).

<sup>59</sup> Erica C. Barnett, "EMPTy," in *The Stranger* 13, no. 40, 17 June 2004, <<http://www.thestranger.com/current/feature.html>> (23 June 2004).

<sup>60</sup> The four sites are: The Edgar Allan Poe House and Museum in Baltimore, MD; The Edgar Allan Poe Museum in Richmond, VA; Edgar Allan Poe Cottage in the Bronx, NY; and the subject of this chapter, Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site in Philadelphia, PA. The Philadelphia Poe House is the only of these sites that is overseen by the Park Service.

<sup>61</sup> The Vine Street Expressway was opened to traffic in 1959.

<sup>62</sup> Marilyn R. Chandler, *Dwelling in the Text*, 13.

<sup>63</sup> Leila Lomax, *Physiognomy: How to Read Character in the Face and to Determine the Capacity for Love, Business, and Crime* (Philadelphia: Penn Publishing Company, 1906), 130-31, 150-51.

<sup>64</sup> Alvin A. Holm, *Historical Structures Report*, "The Edgar Allan Poe House in Spring Garden: #530 North 7<sup>th</sup> St., Philadelphia," National Park Service. Philadelphia, PA. May 1982.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 114-15.

<sup>66</sup> Stephen M. Sitariski, Unit Sites Manager, Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site, conversation with author, 12 May 2004.

<sup>67</sup> For a discussion of historical authenticity versus visual authenticity, see: Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1986), 15-16.

<sup>68</sup> Ron Thomson et al., "Long Range Interpretive Plan: Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site," National Park Service. Philadelphia, PA, December 2003.

<sup>69</sup> Marilyn R. Chandler, *Dwelling in the Text*, 47.

<sup>70</sup> "Welcome to the Edgar Allan Poe Cottage," Brochure, The Bronx County Historical Society, The Bronx, New York, n.d.

<sup>71</sup> David Leatherbarrow, "The Poetics of the Architectural Setting: A Study of the Writing of Edgar Allan Poe," *VIA* 8 (1986): 8.

<sup>72</sup> Marilyn R. Chandler, *Dwelling in the Text*, 47.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>74</sup> Alvin A. Holm, *Historical Structures Report*, “The Edgar Allan Poe House in Spring Garden: #530 North 7<sup>th</sup> St., Philadelphia;” and John Lloyd and Associates, *Architectural Report on the Restoration of the Edgar Allan Poe House*, Free Library of Philadelphia. Philadelphia, PA, October 1973. All information regarding the structural history of the buildings is from these reports unless otherwise noted.

<sup>75</sup> Dwight Thomas and David K. Jackson, *The Poe Log: A Documentary Life of Edgar Allan Poe 1809-1849* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Company, 1987), 248, 255, 379, 409. In 1838 Poe, his wife Virginia, and her mother Mrs. Clemm moved from New York to 202 Mulberry [Arch] Street in Philadelphia. In the same year, they moved to a house on Sixteenth Street, near Locust. In 1842 the Poe family moved to a small row house near Twenty-fifth and Coates Street [Fairmount Avenue], in the Fairmount district. Probably around April of 1843, the family moved to another small house at 234 [now 530] North Seventh Street in the Spring Garden district of Philadelphia which was then a newly developing suburb north of the city proper.

<sup>76</sup> During Poe’s residence, Brandywine was called Minerva Street. In 1853, the street was renamed Wistar.

<sup>77</sup> The lack of clear delineation between the houses results in some confusion about which house in the complex was inhabited by Poe. Visitors often mistake the building through which they enter the site to be Poe’s house.

<sup>78</sup> Jacques Derrida, quoted in Marcel Bénabou, *Why I Haven’t Written Any of My Books*, trans. David Kornacker (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 85.

<sup>79</sup> Jo Blatti, *Past Meets Present: Essays about Historic Interpretation and Public Audiences*, 5.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>82</sup> Linda Young, “House Museums in Australia,” 175.

<sup>83</sup> Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory*, 140.

<sup>84</sup> Margaret Anderson, “In Search of Women’s Public History: Heritage and Gender,” *Public History Review* 2 (1993): 5.

<sup>85</sup> Stuart Hannabuss, “How Real is Our Past: Authenticity in Heritage Interpretation,” in *Heritage & Museums: Shaping National Identity*, ed. J.M. Fladmark (Dorset: Donhead Publishing, Ltd., 2000), 354.

<sup>86</sup> Linda Young, “House Museums in Australia,” 167.

<sup>87</sup> Linda Young, “A Woman’s Place is in the House ... Museum,” 8.

<sup>88</sup> Linda Young, “House Museums in Australia,” 172.

<sup>89</sup> Linda Young, “A Woman’s Place is in the House ... Museum,” 7.

<sup>90</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 194. The phrase *irredeemable emptiness* is borrowed from Svetlana Boym’s description of Grunewald Station in Berlin, a deportation station used by the Nazis during World War II. Since it has been taken out of commission, Grunewald Station has been left more or less

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untouched with the exception of commemorative plaques on the station platform that give the dates of each deportation, and the number of Jews that were transported to the camps each time.

<sup>91</sup> Miriam Sluis, "Anne Frank House Authentic," 20 October 1999, <<http://www.rnw.nl/culture/anne/html/renovation.html>> (10 May 2004). The Anne Frank House in Amsterdam recently completed construction on a new building that will be used, among other things, to recreate the rooms in which the families lived during the war.

<sup>92</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 206.

<sup>93</sup> "Janet Cardiff: A Survey of Works Including Collaborations with George Bures Miller," 14 October 2001, <<http://www.ps1.org/cut/press/cardiff.html>> (19 June 2004).

<sup>94</sup> Corinne Oster, "Decoding Unreadable Spaces: Claire Denis' *J'ai pas Sommeil (I Can't Sleep)*," *Kinoeye* 3, 9 June 2003, <<http://www.kinoeye.org/03/07/oster07.php>> (30 June 2004).

<sup>95</sup> Roger Asselineau, *Edgar Allan Poe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970), 22.

<sup>96</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "A Dream Within A Dream," in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1992), 24.

<sup>97</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968), 60.

<sup>98</sup> Marcel Bénabou, *Why I Have Not Written Any of My Books*, 84.

<sup>99</sup> Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude*, 122.

<sup>100</sup> Conny Bogaard, "Sypesteyn Castle: A Special Kind of Collector's House in the Netherlands." In *Open Museum Journal: Interpreting Historic House Museums* 5 (July 2002): 1.

<sup>101</sup> Judith M. Guston, Curator and Director of Collections, Rosenbach Museum and Library, conversation with author, 21 April 2004.

<sup>102</sup> Conny Bogaard, "Sypesteyn Castle," 1.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>104</sup> Judith M. Guston, conversation with author.

<sup>105</sup> The Rosenbach Museum is the repository for Marianne Moore's papers, and manuscripts, and her collection of art and books.

<sup>106</sup> Judith Guston, e-mail to author, 13 May 2004. I am grateful to Judith Guston for providing detailed information about the English looking-glass and Chinese teacups described in the text.

<sup>107</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, 162.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> Roger Asselineau, *Edgar Allan Poe*, 22.

<sup>110</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, 158.



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- <sup>111</sup> Author's own transcription from the exhibit panel in the "Highlights Gallery."
- <sup>112</sup> Conny Bogaard, "Sypesteyn Castle," 2.
- <sup>113</sup> Judith M. Guston, conversation with author.
- <sup>114</sup> Selma G. Lanes, *The Art of Maurice Sendak* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2003), 260.
- <sup>115</sup> Every year on June sixteenth, the Rosenbach Museum and Library hosts a number of events in honor of Bloomsday, the fictional day on which Joyce's *Ulysses* takes place. Notable among the activities is a day-long reading of excerpts from *Ulysses* on Delancey Street which is closed to traffic for the occasion.
- <sup>116</sup> Edwin Wolf, II, with John F. Fleming, *Rosenbach: A Biography* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1936), 33, 40. The bookish nature of Dr. Rosenbach is summarized in the class record of 1898—the year he received his undergraduate degree—with a hint of casual disrespect: "A reading machine, wound up and going, /He mastered what was not worth knowing."
- <sup>117</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 326.
- <sup>118</sup> Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude*, 89.
- <sup>119</sup> Author's own transcription from the exhibit "R is for Rosenbach."
- <sup>120</sup> Ian Hodder, ed., *The Meaning of Things*, xxvi.
- <sup>121</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library," 60.
- <sup>122</sup> Christine Boyer, *City of Collective Memory*, 133.
- <sup>123</sup> John Berger, *Art and Revolution* (New York: Pantheon, 1969), 75.
- <sup>124</sup> Christine Boyer, *City of Collective Memory*, 132.
- <sup>125</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, xii.
- <sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.
- <sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.
- <sup>128</sup> Eleanor Wilner, "Z is for Zoë," poem prepared for a reading sponsored by the Rosenbach Museum and Library, Philadelphia, PA, 28 April 2002.
- <sup>129</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 3.
- <sup>130</sup> Stuart Hannabuss, "How Real is Our Past?" in *Heritage Interpretation*, 354.
- <sup>131</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, xii-xiii.
- <sup>132</sup> Parker B. Potter, Jr. and Mark P. Leone, "Establishing the Roots of Historical Consciousness in Modern Annapolis, Maryland," in *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, ed. Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 477.
- <sup>133</sup> Julia Clark et al., "Port Arthur Historic Site Interpretation Plan 2000," Port Arthur Historic Site, Tasmania, Australia, 12 December 2001, 11.

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<sup>134</sup> Ian Hodder, ed., *The Meaning of Things: Material Culture and Symbolic Expression* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), xxvi.

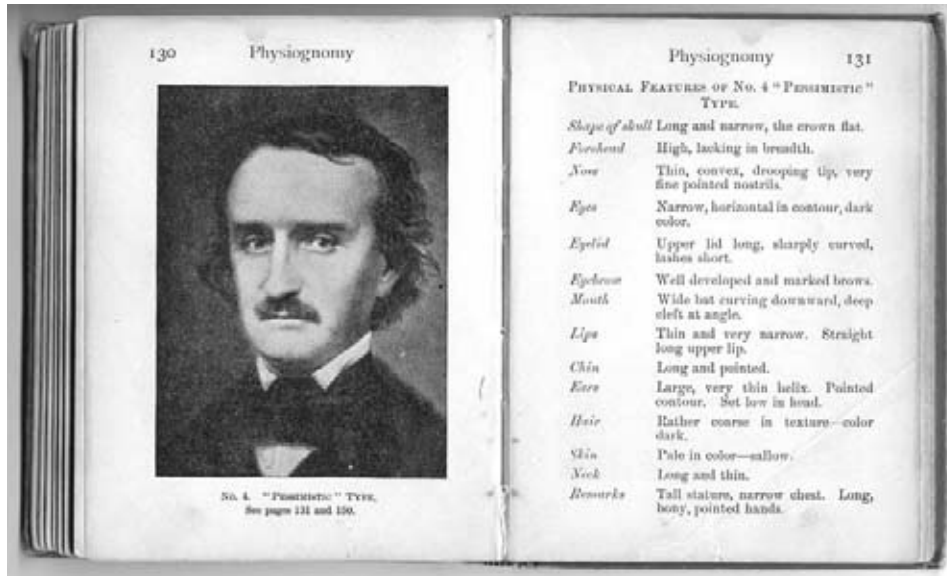
## Illustrations

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### The Emily Dickinson Museum



**Figure 1: Emily Dickinson's desk in her bedroom in the Dickinson Homestead, n.d. Collection of the Emily Dickinson Museum.**



**Figure 2: Image of Edgar Allan Poe in *Physiognomy: How to read character in the face and to determine the capacity for love, business, or crime.***

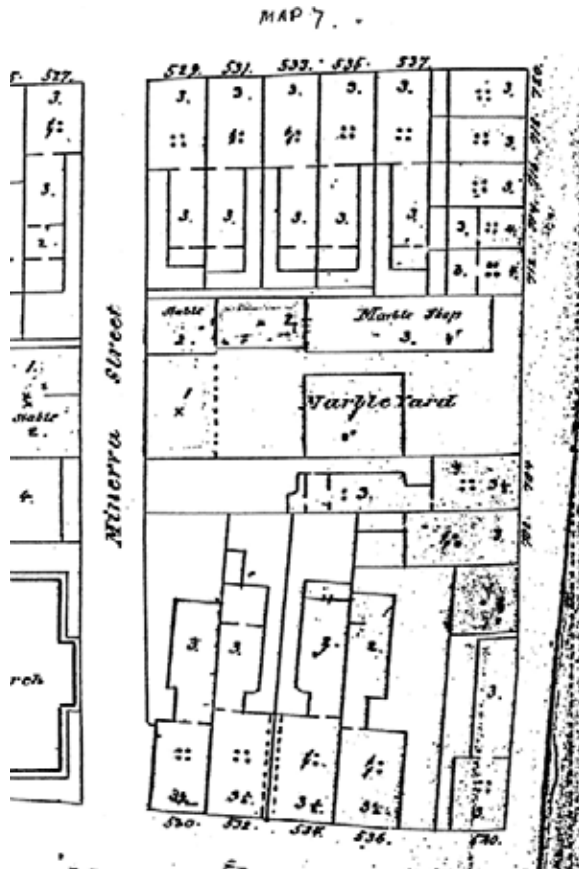


Figure 3: Facsimile of Philadelphia insurance map showing Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site. *Insurance Maps of the City of Philadelphia, PA*. Philadelphia: Ernest Hexamer and William Locher, 1858.



**Figure 4 and 5: Interior Views of the Poe House, 2004. Photographs by Han Salzmann.**

Rosenbach Museum and Library



**Figure 6: Installation of Marianne Moore Room's Greenwich Village Living Room in the Rosenbach Museum, n.d. Collection of Rosenbach Museum and Library.**

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