

## You've come a long way, baby — thank goodness!

Posted on [October 24, 2012](#) by [Anne Bendheim](#)

Yes, I really do like new books. But I'm continually fascinated by books from bygone days — more bygone than my days, in fact.



Opera diva Mme. Geraldine Farrar in Greek Costume as "Thaïs."

As I was strolling through eBay's antiquarian books list, I came upon a wonderfully bizarre title: "Women as Decoration" by Emily Burbank. Illustrated. 1917. What the fig? Were things so backward in America's pre-suffrage days that women could be thought of in the same terms as drapes, embroidered sofa pillows and carpets? Were we then considered the mere tools of the interior designer?

Well, yeah, sort of. As Miss Emily wrote in her introduction: " 'Woman as Decoration' is intended as a sequel to 'The Art of Interior Decoration' (by Grace Wood and Emily Burbank)."

Oy. And she digs the hole even deeper: "Having assisted in setting the stage for woman, the next logical step is the consideration of woman, herself, as an important factor in the decorative scheme of any setting — the vital spark to animate all interior decoration, private or public."

As one who attended that wonderful, intimate concert on the lawn in the summer of 1969 (Woodstock), I object to being objectified in such a manner. But I'm greatly amused and greatly grateful to have, in fact, come miles since the likes of Miss Emily was handing out such advice as: "On the beach, avoid being a dull note."

This book, which is often amazingly readable, offers "a few rules with regard to the styling of a woman which, if understood, put one a long way on the road to that desirable goal — decorativeness."

Yup. That's always been my goal, for me and my entire Baby Boom generation.

But Miss E. does offer some slip-ups when it comes to syntax. It would be hard to find a more convoluted sentence than this:

"Needless to say, when considering woman's costumes, for ordinary use, for ordinary use, in their relation to background, unless some chameleon-like material be invented to take on the



From "Woman as Decoration": "Mrs. Conde Nast was Miss Clarisse Coudert. Her French blood accounts, in part, for her innate feeling for line and colour. Mrs. Nast in an evening gown. Here again is a costume the beauty of which evades the dictum of fashion in the narrow sense of the term. This picture has the distinction of a well-posed and finely executed old master and because possessing beauty of a traditional sort will continue to give pleasure long after the costume has perished."



From "Woman as Decoration": "Mrs. Vernon Castle in a summer afternoon costume appropriate for city or country and so adapted to the wearer's type that she is a picture, whether in action; seated on her own porch; having tea at the country club; or in the Winter sun-parlour."

colour of any background, one must be content with the consideration of one's own rooms, porches, garden, opera-box or automobile, etc."

Burbank enjoys comparing women's dress, or as she calls it "costume," to great works of art. She also claims that clothing has a marked affect on women's behavior: Has the reader ever observed the effect of clothes upon manners? It is amazing, and only proves how pathetically childlike human nature is. Put any woman into a Marie Antoinette costume and see how, during an evening she will gradually take on the mannerisms of that time."

That's happened to me at so many social functions.

Miss Emily admits that her work in the book may, at first glance "seem irrelevant." Shocking.

But, she opines in yet another tangled web of syntax: "Those who have seriously studied any art, and then undertaken to tell its story briefly in simple, direct language, with the hope of quickly putting audience or reader in touch

with the vital links in the chain of evidence, will understand the author's claim that no detour which illustrates the subject can in justice be termed irrelevant.

The didacticism exhibited and the repression exhorted in "Women as Decoration" may seem hopelessly irrelevant, too. But books like this offer us an unabashed and unexpurgated glimpse into the days of our grandmothers. And for anyone interested in the history of women's rights — and who isn't? — books like this can teach valuable lessons.

And they're fun, too.

The entire book is available for free download at [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org). For those wishing to feel pages between their fingers, it's easily found at a variety of online sales and auction sites.

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### About Anne Bendheim

Anne Bendheim is the Books Editor of the Asbury Park Press, the Home News Tribune, the Daily Record and the Courier News. She learned to read when she was 2, and hasn't stopped since. In her checkerboard career, she has worked for theater and opera companies and was the fine arts editor for two newspapers. She was born in Ohio, grew up in Arizona, went to college in Grinnell, Iowa, and has criss-crossed the country numerous times in search of jobs, life and fun. She likes books of all kinds, but for pure enjoyment purposes, she reads mystery novels and old children's chapter books. She is a wife to Pete and also is mother to a cat and a dog. They are, respectively, Tinkerbelle and Charlie. Follow her on Twitter: @AnneBendheim

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## One Response to *You've come a long way, baby — thank goodness!*

**Jeffrey Kliger** says:

October 28, 2012 at 3:01 am

Hi Sam,br // imagine cutting them into cubes speeds up the cooking time and might make them less complicated to mash but I'm not positive the added time it takes to cube them justifies the faster cooking time. You and your wife might need to try experimenting by cooking them the two ways to determine which takes lengthier and if there's any taste difference. I suspect not within the previous section but make sure you allow me know. RG

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