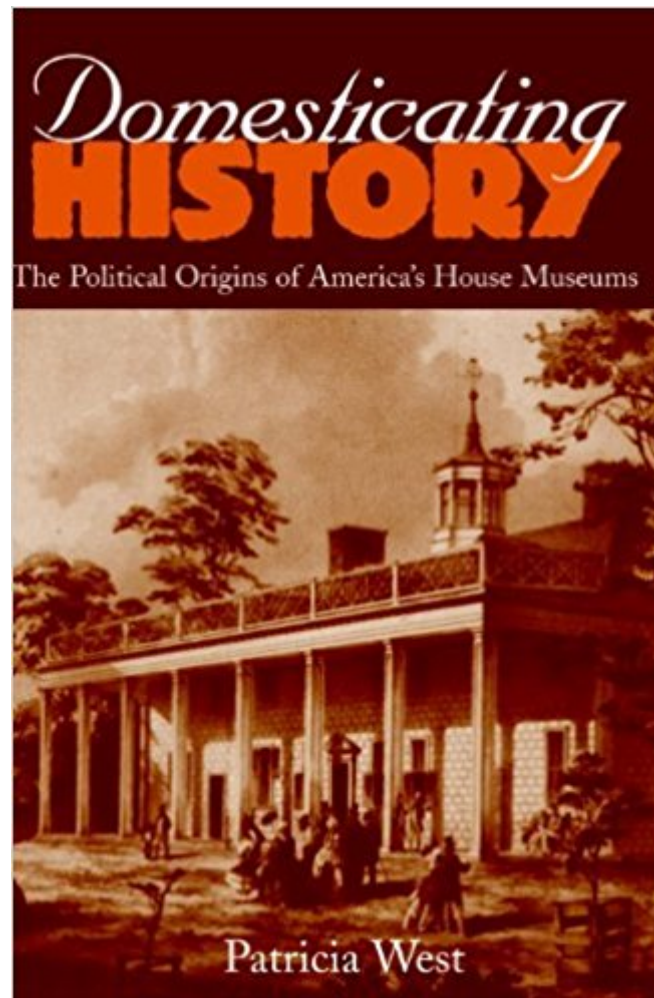




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# Domesticating History: The Political Origins Of America's House Museums





## Synopsis

Celebrating the lives of famous men and women, historic house museums showcase restored rooms and period furnishings, and portray in detail their former occupants' daily lives. But behind the gilded molding and curtain brocade lie the largely unknown, politically charged stories of how the homes were first established as museums. Focusing on George Washington's Mount Vernon, Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House, Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, and the Booker T. Washington National Monument, Patricia West shows how historic houses reflect less the lives and times of their famous inhabitants than the political pressures of the eras during which they were transformed into museums.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Extremely well-researched and judicious. . . . The most distinctive aspect of the book is the author's persistent emphasis upon the political context that shaped the creation of those house museums. . . . [F]illed with delicious ironies."—Michael Kammen, *The Journal of American History*

"[A] nuanced account. . . . [and] crisp little book."—*American Historical Review*

"Domesticating History will undoubtedly become required reading for students and teachers of public history, museum practitioners, and, I hope, historians of women and public life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as well. The historical perspective West provides is especially welcome amid public perception that historic house museums are falling prey to pandemic political correctness."—*The Public Historian*



Patricia West is the curator of Martin Van Buren National Historic Site and teaches at the State University of New York at Albany.

This book reviews the political history behind "house museums" in the United States, historic sites memorializing places where famous Americans lived. West shows us the origin of the house museum movement among politically-active but disenfranchised women, examines how professional men took over from volunteer women in the early decades of the nineteenth century, and explores the increasing diversity of subjects from George Washington and Thomas Jefferson to Louisa May Alcott, Booker T. Washington, and George Washington Carver. West's narrative keeps gender issues central while placing them in the context of wider histories. It goes much further than being "a welcome corrective" to the literature. West makes it clear that the real story is deeply rooted in gender, domesticity, and class, and that studies overlooking these issues get the story wrong. West eschews strict chronology in each chapter. She begins with a narrative of general themes, followed by studies of one or two key founders, with overlapping chronology across sections. This sometimes makes the story difficult to follow, and she does not necessarily point to the key figures as she introduces each one. Stronger overviews at the head of each chapter would help orient the reader to each story more effectively. That aside, this is an impressive piece on the politics of public history, and sure to be the standard work on the American house museum for some time to come.

The two theses of *Domesticating History* are simple enough: that house museums originated in the efforts of women to preserve domesticity by preserving homes of the famous, and that all house museums "are and always have been about politics." (xii) West uses as examples Mount Vernon, Orchard House (the home of Louisa May Alcott), Monticello, and the Booker T. Washington National Monument. The book does provide helpful information about these house museums once the reader threads his way through the author's trendy theorizing and verbiage. West is too little critical of her sources. If they argue for something not politically correct in our own day, she pounces on them and tries to take them literally. Some of her own pronouncements follow this sort of literalistic logic as well: "The fact that 'the most beloved house in America' was 'falling to ruin' tapped into the fear that traditional home life itself was under siege." (67) The author's academic writing style, loaded as it is with jargon, nominalizations, and "scare quotes," makes for dreadful reading. Just two examples from a single page (93): "Like Mount Vernon and Orchard House before it, Monticello was



posited as a unifying influence for seemingly intractable political rifts." "In the hypernationalistic postwar era, the utility of the house museum as patriotic medium and the desire to turn away from European aesthetics toward 'Americana' fostered a boom in both the creation of historic 'shrines' and the collection of American antiques."

Patricia West's interesting book, *Domesticating History*, explores the idea and origination of the house museum industry. She counters the idea that "house museums were founded strictly to memorialize a glorious past separable from politics" (xii). House museums reflect the social and political context in which they were developed and that to truly understand a museum, one must understand the historic context in which it was developed. As West states, "house museums are documents of political history, particularly of women's relationship to the public sphere" (159). As such, West takes her reader through the development of house museums and women's active political stance in this industry by citing four examples from the first hundred years of America's history in this area. She uses the homes of Mount Vernon, Orchard House, Monticello, and Booker T. Washington National Monument to "tell us about the crucial issues of gender and social diversity" (xi). Thus West challenges her readers to re-examine interpretations of house museums within their political, social, and historic context. West brings her expertise to the area of house museums in her new book, *Domesticating History*. She is currently curator of the Martin Van Buren National Historic Site in Kinderhook, New York, and has been involved in different aspects of museum work since as early as 1978. She lectures at various universities on the East Coast and at the Smithsonian. She obtained her Ph.D. at SUNY in Binghamton, 1992, in American History with minor fields in Women's and Public History. She has served as a consultant for the Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site, the Saratoga National Battlefield project, Friendship Hill National Historic Site, and the Chapman and Roberson museums. She continues to teach as an Adjunct Professor in the Public History Graduate Program at SUNY in Albany while holding her position as curator. Substantial notes at the end of her book and numerous articles indicate her extensive research into this field and thus offers us an interesting look into the political involvement of women in the development of house museums. West states that "although this is not a book about house museum interpretations, there are implications to the history of historic house museums for interpretive and curatorial planning" (162). I enjoyed the book and find it useful in many ways. First, it serves as a history text of women's involvement and political roles in the development of house museums. Second, it is a great introduction into the field of house museums and preservation from historic, political, and social viewpoints. And third, it serves as a catalyst for revisiting interpretation of house museums in



the context of social and political atmospheres that existed at the time of preservation. West's book, thus, is an excellent history of the museum house movement using fine examples from different periods that represent main eras of the museum history movement. West brings up interesting questions of what has been preserved and why. Perhaps we should re-exam historic artifacts in light of new information and within the context of the political and social construct of the day.

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