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Elizabeth Guffey

book review of

A History of Modern Design by David Raizman

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David Raizman

A History of Modern Design

Upper Saddle River, NJ : Prentice Hall ; London : Laurence King, 2004

400 p.; 577 illustrations. (some color.) \$58.50

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When James McNeil Whistler audaciously transformed the London dining room of shipping magnate Frederick Leyland into a gilded swirl of *japonisme* known as the Peacock Room, it produced a battle between artist and patron that became, at least in Whistler's view, a test of artistic freedom. Relations were further strained when Leyland refused to pay the fee demanded by Whistler and famously decided to give the artist only half the requested sum. Less remarked, though, was the denomination of Leyland's payment: he wrote the final check in pounds, usually only presented to tradesmen, rather than guineas, the form of payment favored by artists and professionals. Leyland's response has been interpreted variously. No doubt, the millionaire ship owner was infuriated by the artist, with whom he already had complex and troubled personal and business connections. Although the payment in pounds represented a small but significant financial loss for Whistler, as the denomination carried a lower monetary value than guineas, the question of status loomed large too. G.W. Smalley, an American journalist from the *New York Daily Tribune*, took up Whistler's invitation to see the Peacock Room on two different occasions. After his second visit, and hearing of Leyland's cursory payment, Smalley defended Whistler by refuting its implications in print. Smalley noted the great "difference between upholsters' tricks and the sincerity of an artist of genius." Nobody, not even "the most untrained eye," could mistake the talent demonstrated here for the work of a "mere craftsman."^[1] For Whistler, Smalley, and many contemporaries, the implication that fine art might be confused with craft or design was deeply offensive.

Over the past two centuries, design's relation to the fine arts has remained ambiguous. Modern design can encompass not only the decorative arts but also mass-produced consumer goods, film, television, and the burgeoning field of digital media. As Whistler's experience with the Peacock Room suggests, the field was especially muddled during the nineteenth century, a seminal period for design studies. While the parameters of nineteenth-century fine art have long been established, there are few touchstones for design studies during this period. Because emerging strategies of industrial production and mass consumption shaped so much of the period's visual culture, this equivocal relationship forms an especially compelling problem both to specialists in nineteenth-century art and to

design historians. In grappling with these issues, David Raizman's *A History of Modern Design* has quickly assumed landmark status within the field of design studies, particularly for those interested in this relatively new field's nineteenth-century origins.

An introductory survey intended for a general audience, the book's format echoes familiar art historical texts, for instance H.H. Arnason's *A History of Modern Art* or *Nineteenth-Century European Art* by Petra Ten-Doesschate Chu. Like these authors, Raizman focuses the narrative on key works and projects while weaving together a series of complex arguments within a roughly chronological framework. Tracing developments in design from the mid-eighteenth through early twenty-first centuries, Raizman's serious and extended examination of nineteenth-century design is as refreshing as it is unusual, and it is that discussion, in Parts I and II, that is the subject of this review. The paucity of extended writing on nineteenth-century design remains a troubling omission in design scholarship, as the period has profoundly shaped design as the field that we recognize today. Moreover, the nineteenth century also marks the development of artists and architects, as well as designers, whose engagement with industrial processes is crucial to their formal approaches. From John Flaxman's original work for Wedgwood to Henry van de Velde's groundbreaking approaches to design for mass production, Raizman focuses his text on the individuals who help to interpret and elucidate the design process as well as on the larger social and economic forces that made such developments possible. In doing so, the boundaries that separate design and fine art in the nineteenth century begin to seem porous and provocative.

Raizman traces the development of modern design to innovations in production and patterns of consumption that emerged in the eighteenth century; brief analyses of the prolific state-owned Gobelins tapestry works, the Sèvres porcelain factory, and Chippendale's transformation of furnishings into fashionable commodities establish his contextual approach. A model for the interdisciplinary methodologies that typically mark design studies, the text moves easily between specific facets of design practice, shifting in a single chapter from typography and fashion to a discussion of early forms of factory organization. In these first two sections of the book, Raizman describes the complex development of industrialization in the nineteenth century and its impact on visual culture, identifying such well-known examples as Morris's Art and Crafts reforms and the advent of the Art Nouveau. However, he also elucidates points that may be less familiar to art historians, for instance the nineteenth-century roots of Fordism^[2] or the graphic implications of the advent of the Linotype machine at the end of the century.

Some in the design community will decry what art historians should consider one of the book's chief strengths—its straightforward equation of developments in fine art with those in design. Raizman's discussion of developments in high fashion, or haute couture, in Paris in the second half of the nineteenth century, for example, is illustrated by J.D. Ingres' famous portrait of Mme. Moitessier (1851), whose colorful, richly textured gown resembles a veritable rose garden. Raizman also considers design's role in artists' marketing ploys, mentioning Whistler's famous decoration of his London studio and Frederic Leighton's construction of the Arab Hall, a blue-tiled fantasy built in his home between 1876 and 1880. While the last two decades have seen a general movement to "scientize" the field of design, *A History of Modern Design* reminds us of the discipline's close proximity to the visual arts;

indeed, many painters, sculptors, and architects maintained dual careers as designers. Raizman, however, remains keenly aware of design's crucial distinctions from the fine arts as well. He dwells, for instance, on the industrial processes that prodded typographic developments, exploring the lineage of the bold "fat faces" used to create the jarring Victorian posters whose urgings and admonitions still shriek across the centuries.

For those unfamiliar with the field, *A History of Modern Design* presents a cogent argument for studying design as both a production-based discipline and as an intellectually-driven profession, as Raizman consistently examines design within the context of complex social change. His discussion of the Aesthetic movement, for example, highlights the significance of women and includes key figures like Maria Longworth Nichols, who founded Cincinnati's Rookwood Pottery. Specialists will also recognize the text's assimilation of numerous significant arguments in design published in the last twenty years. For example, Adrian Forty's groundbreaking case for eliminating the designer from nineteenth-century design history, and his pointed discussion of the social and cultural forces that have shaped visual culture, shade Raizman's analysis of the mechanization of fabric printing, and the multiplicity of choice that industrial manufacturing presented to consumers in the pages of early mail-order catalogs like the one published by Montgomery Ward.^[3] Similarly, Philip Meggs' still-definitive survey of graphic design history has influenced much of Raizman's discussion of developments on the printed page, including his synopses on wood type and the importance of linotype.^[4]

Whether positively or by means of rejection, most treatments of nineteenth-century design are still influenced by Nikolas Pevsner's seminal *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius* and *Sources of Modern Architecture and Design*, which guided a whole generation of scholarship. With the advancing force of a great steam engine chugging slowly out of Pevsner's beloved St. Pancras Station, the latter book carefully built an argument for the increasing functionalism of nineteenth-century design. His case begins with the Crystal Palace, which is introduced as "a mid-nineteenth century touchstone, if one wishes to discover what belongs wholly to the nineteenth century and what points forward into the twentieth."^[5] Raizman, by contrast, treats the Crystal Palace as a cursory subject, discussing it mainly as a backdrop to the spectacular theatrics of industrial prowess housed within it; he focuses instead on the numerous calls for design reform that prompted the 1851 Exhibition of Art and Industry in the first place. Raizman's account of the nineteenth century focuses less on the evolution of functionalism than the proliferation of forms that dominated late eighteenth and nineteenth-century design, describing work by the Herter Brothers and Robert Adam as well as that of Sullivan and Riemerschmid.

Perhaps Pevsner's legacy shaped Raizman's decision not to dwell on architectural developments. Where Pevsner saw design as a kind of unwieldy outgrowth of architecture, Raizman eschews extended analyses of the built environment. However doctrinaire the approach of Pevsner and others, the lack of reference to buildings, with their tremendous influence on design aesthetics as well as their ability to embody the collective dreams of entire societies, leaves holes in this narrative. The extended description of William Morris' early design enterprises, for instance, limits Philip Webb's contribution to the design of the Morris adjustable chair; the text hardly mentions Webb's architectural affiliations and

quickly skims over the Red House, Webb's great contribution to the Arts and Crafts movement and later developments in middle-class housing.

Upon the first publication of a book of sweeping scope and authoritative purpose come the inevitable arguments about inclusion. Those scanning for a "who's who of modern design" might question, for instance, Raizman's brief mention of the Thonet brothers, as well as his decision not to cite their famous Chair No. 14, a ubiquitous symbol of industrial change that haunts Tissot and Lautrec paintings alike. While Raizman includes a remarkable array of information in a single volume, his tendency to skim key works and focus on themes of social and technological change could well frustrate those looking for an encyclopedic approach to design history. Other birthing pains for a new text include a number of spelling errors and factual discrepancies that surely will be addressed in later editions. For example, one of Wright's Highland Park homes is located in Mamaroneck, New York rather than the suburbs of Chicago. For some such errors might diminish the book's arguments, however its chief strength, synthesizing a wide body of knowledge into an easily comprehended text, should not be overlooked. Nevertheless, Raizman directly confronts one of the greatest problems to wrack nineteenth-century designers from Ruskin to the German Werkbund at the turn of the century: just how integral is the machine to designers, or for that matter, design studies? In academe, the fields of engineering, economics, and management have rapidly colonized the discipline, and there have been few efforts in the humanities to assert a cogent argument for the contributions of humanist study in this field. As Raizman's text implies, the methods of analysis employed by historians as well as anthropologists, cultural geographers, social psychologists, and literary critics hold enormous relevance for the field, nudging art historical inquiry in design studies beyond a mere chronicle of changing styles. Raizman's position is that the machine is crucial to design development in the nineteenth century, but he also includes some of the debate surrounding the rich nineteenth-century handicraft tradition. His discussion encompasses, for instance, the Shakers, and encapsulates their attitudes toward craftsmanship as well as their roots in a radical form of Christianity. He also includes Whistler's Peacock Room, although it is less a machine-inspired design than an example of artistic handiwork. This point was ignored by the vindictive Frederick Leyland, resulting in Whistler's final payment in pounds. But pounds or guineas, *A History of Modern Design* establishes nineteenth-century design firmly within broader histories of the period.

Elizabeth Guffey
Associate Professor
Coordinator, Art History, State University of New York
Purchase, New York

Notes

[1] G.W. Smalley, quoted in Linda Merrill, *The Peacock Room: A Cultural Biography*, (Washington DC: Freer Gallery, 1998) 268.

[2] The system of mass production and consumption that was pioneered in the first decades of the twentieth century by Henry Ford. Characterized by standardization of parts, and the innovation of continuous assembly-line manufacture, Ford's Model T plant in Highland Park,

Michigan shaped much political and economic theory in the twentieth century, especially immediately before and after the Second World War.

[3] Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire: Design and Society Since 1750*, (New York: Pantheon, 1986).

[4] Philip Meggs, *A History of Graphic Design*, (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1983).

[5] Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Sources of Modern Architecture and Design*, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1968., 10.