

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Julie L'Enfant

book review of

The Victorian Illustrated Book by Richard Maxwell, ed.

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 3, no. 1 (Spring 2004)

Citation: Julie L'Enfant, book review of *The Victorian Illustrated Book* by Richard Maxwell, ed., *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2004), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring04/the-victorian-illustrated-book-ed-richard-maxwell>.

Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#) [Creative Commons License](#).

Richard Maxwell, editor
The Victorian Illustrated Book
Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2002
448 pages; 125 b/w ills.; \$45.00
ISBN 0-8139-2097-3
Index; notes

This collection of essays addresses an unwieldy subject: the Victorian illustrated book, which cannot be defined exactly, in view of its multiplicity, but which nevertheless seems to exist as an identifiable whole. An unprecedented number of books with images was produced in England and Scotland from the 1830s until the First World War. Books in general flourished in Victorian Britain, of course, due to developments in mass-market publishing, and print might well have overshadowed graphic art. But the glut of words actually fostered illustrations due to what Richard Maxwell, the editor of this volume, calls a "widely shared hunger for visual stimulation" (xxv).^[1] Technological advances in mechanical reproduction made illustrations more feasible and economical, but these essays are not concerned with such practical developments. They deal, by and large, with the relation between image and text.

In the opening essay, "Walter Scott, Historical Fiction, and the Genesis of the Victorian Illustrated Book," Richard Maxwell explains that, before Scott, "illustration" meant verbal explanation—of which Scott's own works had many. (The first edition of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* [1809] was almost one half notes.) Scott's own prodigious output used "illustration" in a number of senses, verbal and visual, as Maxwell explains in this substantial, well-reasoned discussion. Ostensibly visual images were used to authenticate points made in the text, and Scott's illustrators adopted the tradition of antiquarian drawings for the author's sometimes complex purposes (a notable case being the Scottish regalia). On the other hand, an illustration might serve to destabilize the text, as in the case of an illustration of the "Lee-penny" in the posthumous Abbotsford edition of *The Talisman*. Whereas text and notes preserve a neutral tone about whether this talisman actually possesses its reputed powers, an illustration on the final page of a box for the Lee-penny owned by the Empress Queen Charlotte Sophia, wife of George III, raises issues of madness and fundamental questions about kingship; it also connotes relics, which have their own particular kind of truth.

Steven Dillon also deals with the suggestiveness and ambiguity of objects in "Illustrations of Time: Watches, Dials, and Clocks in Victorian Pictures." His inquiry into formal and iconographical implications exhibits a great range of reference: he seems to have noticed the timepieces (usually lost in the welter of Victorian things) in virtually every book or periodical of this "time-conscious 'age of historicism'" (53). Whereas we might expect clocks to serve a regularizing function, Dillon more often finds connotations of "genial domestic time" in publications aimed, after all, at readers with leisure enough to read them. Yet time also leads inevitably to death, hence a number of instances where timepieces have dark associations. Dillon's broad theme is handled anecdotally and comes to no definite conclusions, as illustrated by his analysis of an unidentified "circle depending from a ribbon around his neck" to be seen in illustrations of Mr. Pickwick: is it a watch, an eyeglass, a

medal? There is no clear answer, and Dillon rues the literalism of the one edition that identifies the mysterious shape.

In "Serial Illustration and Storytelling in David Copperfield" Robert L. Patten seeks to demonstrate that images can be as complex and "polyvocal" as text. Dickens's narrator is a mature man, a successful novelist, yet he also directly represents the thoughts and feelings of his ten-year-old self, and Patten makes much of the challenge to Hablot Knight Browne ("Phiz") in representing this complex point of view. The essay emphasizes an illustration for the original serial titled "I make myself known to my aunt," when David, quite desperate and bereft of other hopes for his future—presents himself to Betsey Trotwood, hitherto a remote and frightening personage soon to reveal herself as a redemptive maternal figure. This scene required Phiz to show David as a near-beggar and yet suggest the spunk that will allow him to succeed, also to convey Aunt Betsey's complex reactions to him. Patten examines sketches and related images from the serial to show how "the verbal epistemology of recollection and reconnection is matched by a visual epistemology of blended points of view and physical reconnections" (120). Phiz's gentle illustrations would seem to stagger under the weight of this analysis, yet Patten does demonstrate a strong connection between the text and these images, which were not treated kindly by critics and omitted or replaced in later editions.

Simon Joyce's "Maps and Metaphors: Topographical Representation and the Sense of Place in Late-Victorian Fiction" addresses issues raised by the use of illustrative maps in fiction in the second half of the nineteenth century. Maps would seem to be neutral visual duplicates of information in the text, but Joyce uses post-structuralist theory to examine them as several different kinds of arguments about the world. Maps can "locate" a vanished world, as in Arthur Morrison's *A Child of the Jago* (1895), where a map establishes the reality of a subculture in the East End of London that in the course of the novel wanes and disappears. Or a map can "locate" a fictional site, even establish routes for literary pilgrims, as in the case of the map of Egdon Heath drawn by Thomas Hardy himself for the first edition of *The Return of the Native* (1878). (Hardy, who went so far as to emulate the style of an ordnance survey, later admitted the map to be largely fictional.) Maps can also "locate" adventures, as in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) and H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1886). Stevenson's tale literally developed out of a map he drew to entertain a child, we learn, and the map is the mainspring of the plot even if it proves to be a red herring. Joyce relates Haggard's map (also a red herring) to sinister elements of colonialism, manifested by its high-handed conferral of European names to African sites. Referring to an interpretation by Anne McClintock, he suggests that the map might even undermine the text by alluding—when seen upside down—to "the presence of alternative female powers and of alternative African notions of time and knowledge."

Herbert F. Tucker's essay, "Literal Illustration in Victorian Print," is also concerned with the tension between image—here in the form of letters or words—and printed text. His topic includes decorated capitals, as seen in *Punch* illustrations by John Tenniel and Richard Doyle. Amusing examples of capitals incorporated into illustrational drawings by William Makepeace Thackeray, who worked as an illustrator for *Punch* in his early days, make Tucker's point that initial capitals are about reading—in particular, the voluntary entry of the reader into the fictive world. Tucker also examines how handwriting figures in printed

texts, from the "illiterations" of *The Pickwick Papers*, where a carved inscription mistaken for an archaeological find is rendered in type for humorous effect, to John Ruskin's revealing use of samples of his own handwriting in *Praeterita*. In a discussion of the prosody of various Victorian poets, Tucker argues that the best illustrations for poems provide some kind of visual analogy to the text. The most complex issues are found in the work of William Morris, whose Kelmscott productions show the culmination of letter as designed image.

Essays by Elizabeth K. Helsinger and Jeffrey Skoblow continue the discussion of William Morris, who, according to Richard Maxwell, "emerges as probably the single most important figure in Victorian book design" (xxvii). Helsinger deals with the early years when Morris was still casting around for his vocation. Wishing to address issues of contemporary life and labor, he looked to the "lesser arts" of interior design and book arts ("the wall and the page") rather than great art, which involved struggle and strain. Although forced in time to use machines, Morris wanted to reproduce the "unconscious intelligence" and sensory knowledge, and pleasure, of traditional crafts. Thus the designs used recurrent pattern and rhythmic repetition within an overall architectural structure, and so, Helsinger argues, did the poems. Although such poems by Morris as *The Earthly Paradise* are often dismissed as escapist, Helsinger argues persuasively that by providing a "new way to live in Art," they were meant to coax the modern imagination back into health and even imbue the reader (or listener, for they were meant to be read aloud) with hope for the future.

In "Beyond Reading: Kelmscott and the Modern," Jeffrey Skoblow asks how contemporary scholars can make such an idiosyncratic and antiquarian enterprise as the Kelmscott press new. His answer lies in looking at the books, particularly the Chaucer, as material objects, indeed, as ritual objects. Morris is seen to share an "Aesthetics of the Dire" with twentieth-century theorists such as Walter Benjamin and Charles Bernstein, and like them to be looking for a way to overcome the commodification of art. Kelmscott restored the "aura" to books at a time when they had become commonplace. Skoblow shows how Morris's text and images are "fully interpenetrated" in such works as *The Glittering Plain*, where everything works together: the initial capitals, the box-within-box page design, and the opening (the two-page spread of the open book that Morris recognized as its essential shape). Even typeface is seen to have its own analogous "materiality." Here is Morris's modernity: his texts are "iconic," i.e. designed to be seen as texts, thus forcing the reader to examine the act of reading.

Nicholas Frankel makes the same point in "Aubrey Beardsley 'Embroiders' the Literary Text." Beardsley (like Morris, a fertile subject for post-structuralist analysis) also saw the text as a fabricated thing that could interact with image and design. His work on an edition of the *Rape of the Lock* in the late 1890s included the binding, a list of illustrations, frames for the images—all of which draw attention to the book as a book. The obtrusive graphic line of his drawings reminds us that they are drawn; such aspects as the prominent stippled effect remind us that they are to be reproduced photomechanically. Benjamin's "Painting and the Graphic Arts" is important to Frankel's analysis of Beardsley's style, seen in terms of a post-structuralist skirmish against the authority of the text (and also, in the process, supporting the poem's subtext of transgression)—a provocative point of view, although art historians

might object to placing Beardsley's style in such a postmodern vacuum, without reference to Art Nouveau, Japanese prints, or other influences.

Similarly without art historical context is Charles Harmon's essay "Alvin Langdon Coburn's Frontispieces to Henry James's New York Edition: Pictures of an Institutional Imaginary." With some ambivalence, Harmon follows postmodern critics who interpret Henry James by means of "queer theory," loosely defined as a sense of "otherness" from societal norms. Not surprisingly, James opposed the very idea of illustrating his novels, but he did in the end sanction the use of Coburn's photographs in the ambitious New York Edition. Coburn's frontispiece to *The Portrait of a Lady*, a photograph of an English country house, reflects the ambiguity of James's text by both idealizing and de-idealizing this common symbol for cultural prestige. It is, for Harmon, the blurriness of Coburn's image that provides a place for this ambiguity. Neither Coburn's artistic objectives as related to other Pictorialist photographers nor James's own ideas about Coburn's contributions figure in Harmon's postmodern analysis, which, of course, assumes the death of the author. Indeed, James is seen to figure in the death of the novelistic illustration, since he, along with Flaubert, Joyce, and others, "transformed the image of the serious writer into a quasi-priestly wordsmith, suspicious of icons and exclusively attuned to the displacements of the signifier" (299). Coburn's photograph of James in profile (the frontispiece to his first major novel, *Roderick Hudson*) becomes the very image of the postmodern marginal man, with "a nameless sense of otherness" (325).

Katie Trumpener's essay, "City Scenes: Commerce, Utopia, and the Birth of the Picture Book," returns to a more benign domestic sphere with a consideration of children's books, common in Victorian homes by the 1830s—in particular, the children's guide to London, pioneered by Ann and Jane Taylor (members of William Blake's circle) and continued by Thomas Crane and Ellen Houghton, E. V. Lucas and Francis Bedford, Randolph Caldecott, and Kate Greenaway. Trumpener's concern is largely socioeconomic in this analysis of attitudes toward the city and the surrounding countryside, and she focuses on social relationships and "the ethics of spectatorship, encounter, and witness" (345). Whereas the Taylors' *City Scenes* (1809) alert children to the socioeconomic injustices that lie behind enchantments of the city such as the "sensory paradise" of Covent Garden, later books such as Compton Mackenzie's *Kensington Rhymes* (1912) eliminate moral lessons and implicitly invite their readers to be infant flâneurs who treat the city as a spectacle where "rich children play, poor children work" (371). London is seen as the gateway to imaginative realms in such books as *The Town Child's Alphabet* (1924) and *Mary Poppins* (1934).

Richard Maxwell's afterword, "The Destruction, Rebirth, and Apotheosis of the Victorian Illustrated Book," demonstrates that although the tradition of the Victorian illustrated book might seem to have died by 1913 it was through destruction that it survived. A bellwether was *What a Life!* (1911), the tongue-in-cheek biography by E. V. Lucas and George Morrow with text parodying nineteenth-century "sensation fiction" and illustrations cut out of a Whiteley's catalogue. Its ironic juxtaposition of word and image, deliberate infantilism, and use of popular imagery presaged Dada, Surrealism, and other subversive twentieth-century movements (*What a Life!* was, in fact, included in the 1936 MOMA exhibition "Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism"). Maxwell considers the further transmogrification of the tradition by Max Ernst and Joseph Cornell, the latter who "himself sometimes seems like a figure

constructed for experimental purposes out of odd bits of Thomas De Quincey, Emily Dickinson, and Lewis Carroll" (406). Maxwell also discusses the curious figure of Henry Darger, a self-taught artist who obsessively made scrapbooks and created a nineteen-thousand-word novel about the mythic Vivian girls, illustrated with images originally stored in loose-leaf books. (Although Darger was the subject of a 1998 exhibition at the University of Iowa Museum of Art, the text unfortunately supplies no illustrations of his work.) The use of Victorian books as fodder for late-twentieth century irony and self-consciousness is seen in Tom Phillips's *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel* (1980), which subjects the text of W. H. Mallock's 1892 novel *A Human Monument* to marking out, over-writing, and random illustration. The appearance of Victorian imagery in film, most notably Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), further shows its enduring appeal to the contemporary imagination.

This collection of essays is not, of course, comprehensive in its treatment of the subject. Whereas Scott, Dickens, and Morris are discussed extensively, figures such as Lewis Carroll and John Tenniel remain tangential. Art historians may miss a more thoroughly developed art historical context for the artists considered, particularly William Morris. On the other hand, they may value other points of view from these writers who are, by and large, literary scholars (a notable exception being Elizabeth Helsinger, a professor of art history as well as English at the University of Chicago). The subject is an important one for all scholars of the nineteenth century. Maxwell cites the strong impact of the Victorian illustrated book on grand narrative painting, poetry, the theater, the writing of history, and journalism. (We are reminded that the *London Illustrated News* was founded with explicit acknowledgement of the influence of the Abbotsford edition of Scott.) Citing Pater's dictum that "all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music," Maxwell observes that "at one time or another, during the nineteenth century, all the arts in England—even music, when it accepted the mystique of the program—yearned to achieve the condition of illustration" (xxii). This volume goes a long way toward elucidating the complexities of that condition.

Julie L'Enfant
Associate Professor
Department of Liberal Arts
College of Visual Arts
St. Paul, Minnesota

Notes

[1] All references to page numbers within the text are to Maxwell, ed., *The Victorian Illustrated Book*.