

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

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Change/Continuity: Writing About Art in Britain Before and After 1900

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 14, no. 2 (Summer 2015)

Citation: Martina Droth and Peter Trippi, "Change/Continuity: Writing About Art in Britain Before and After 1900," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2015), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/summer15/droth-trippi-introduction-writing-about-art-in-britain-before-and-after-1900>.

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

Notes:

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Change/Continuity: Writing About Art in Britain Before and After 1900

by Martina Droth and Peter Trippi

Victorian and Modernist Art Histories

The real greatness of this period, with its vortices of revolt against the placid, almost stagnant art then lying everywhere at a dead level, is coming more clearly into view as the years recede; there is no doubt but it will become recognized as a vital power in modern movements.

—W. E. Sparkes, 1909^[1]

This remarkable proclamation of optimism over the promised legacy of Victorian art would soon appear wholly misplaced. Indeed, what makes this sentence so striking is that the very words employed by the art educator W. E. Sparkes would almost immediately be reprised to effect the repudiation of the era he sought to defend. “Placid,” “stagnant,” and “dead” might easily stand for Modernism’s dismissal of Victorian art and culture, while, in what seems a supreme irony, Sparkes’s Victorian “vortices of revolt” find their echo five years later in a polemical revolt of an altogether different kind, that of the Vorticists’ “BLAST” to the “years 1837 to 1900.”^[2] It is, of course, the latter use of such terms that, art-historically speaking, won the upper hand, and that remains astonishingly powerful today. Yet the overlapping language also suggests an interdependence and continuity of ideas—a connection that art-historical scholarship is only beginning to tease out. The assertion that the aesthetics of the Victorians belong to the story of Modernism has gained increasing currency, but it must be said that this idea continues to require justification, insistence, and defense: it still cannot be taken for granted.

The “Victorian” in art remains sharply distinguished from its “Modernist” foil, the neat coincidence of Queen Victoria’s death in 1901 literally seeming to end the Victorian age at the turn of the century. Indeed, the deaths of other key figures of the Victorian art world—notably Ruskin’s in 1900, and Leighton’s in 1896—further helped affirm a sense of closure to the era. While periodization is not uncommon in the study of art history, the divisions that exist between these two arenas have proved particularly resilient. As David Peters Corbett has noted, while “for the scholarship on Manet and French Impressionism, undoubtedly the most extensive and influential body of writing on nineteenth-century art, modernism begins in the mid-nineteenth century,” an entirely different set of criteria has been applied to the British context.^[3] Despite the sweeping changes that mark the periods in question, and the ambiguities carried by the labels under which they are organized, the terms impose a set of boundaries that remain well-adhered to. Unlike scholars of history and literature, British and otherwise, who have long taken for granted the continuum of writings and lives, and who have led the way in the critique and deconstruction of the hegemony of periodization,^[4] the history of British art has largely shaped its canons according to a “before” and “after,” with the Victorian “before” carrying highly negative connotations for the aesthetics of the twentieth century.

The notion that art which falls into the period just before and just after 1900 has to be defined along different, even antithetical, criteria, raises the problems not only of how to deal with artists whose lives and works span the two centuries, but also how to address the resonance and afterlife of art that is classed as “Victorian,” how to accommodate the lasting impact of Victorian culture on subsequent generations of artists, and how to understand the ways in which ideas about art were articulated across ensuing decades. These are compelling questions, yet they still tend to remain largely unaddressed: easily ignored in the case of artists whose deaths happen to fall in the Victorian period, and whose works thereby become confined to a separate category, they are often absent in the case of those who lived across the centuries, their work willfully adopted for one or other era. Thus, while it is perhaps not surprising that an artist like Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898) has hardly figured in the analysis of Modernism, the stubborn persistence of periodization becomes all the more striking in the case of artists who messily undermine these labels. For example, while the life and work of Alfred Gilbert—born in 1854 but actively producing sculptures of note until his death in 1934—have been classified as deeply Victorian, the career of a near-contemporary, Walter Sickert—born in 1860 and active until 1942—is firmly embedded into the discourses of Modernism. Little correspondence between such cases exists in scholarship concentrated on either side of the divide.

What this situation so sharply highlights is how powerful the compulsion remains to erase or minimize Victorian debts in the art of the twentieth century; much more powerful, in this instance, than the agency of the artist. When it comes to “Victorian” and “Modernist” artists, no basis exists for a discourse around continuity and influence in the same way that the reception history of past “masters” has shaped the study of the late nineteenth century. As a methodology, reception history has provided an approach for reconsidering entire eras, as well as for reconsidering the impact of generationally closer legacies—for example, the ongoing importance and influence of figures like Reynolds and Turner for subsequent generations of artists in the mid- and late nineteenth century. No parallel exists in relation to the Victorians. Indeed, the notion that we might apply an analogous methodology to the early twentieth century, positing the Victorians as past masters of lasting influence, remains untenable, ridiculous even: theirs was an influence to be shed, demolished, eradicated.

Of course, the field has not remained static or settled. On the contrary, scholars are increasingly interested in challenging the conventions by which Modernism has bounded both its own field, and those which preceded it. Indeed, more scholars of not only Victorian art, but also of twentieth-century art, are seeking to fill in the great lacuna that stands between the two centuries. Modernism’s own trajectory is seen as one that must be challenged and reconfigured; for a long time locked into a morass of its own, scholars have only recently begun to unravel some of the rigid and over-determined narratives that have made up its canon.

Modernism and the Rehabilitation of Victorian Art

The relationship between “Victorian” and “Modernist” art histories is directly symbiotic, in that Modernism’s account of its own ascent has been driven by the denial of what came immediately before; that is, the repudiation of Victorian art is inextricable from the establishment of Modernism’s story. Indeed, Victorian art history is still struggling to rebuild itself after the total collapse of the prestige of Victorian art in the early twentieth century; no other corpus of artistic endeavor has suffered such a devastating downfall. Its stellar figures—

Frederic Leighton, Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Alfred Gilbert, George Frederic Watts, all of them recognized at the highest public level in their time—were swiftly relegated to obscurity. The bibliographies, exhibition records, and sales histories for this group and their contemporaries starkly record the decline of their reputations in the early twentieth century.

Critic Malcolm C. Salaman's 1921 account in the *Studio* of Victorian masterworks in the collection of Viscount Leverhulme (1851–1925) was typically patronizing: "All the traditional prescriptions for picture-making seem to be explicit here in the old familiar pictures."^[5] Having proudly loaned J. W. Waterhouse's masterwork *Hylas and the Nymphs* (1896) to four world expositions, the Manchester Art Gallery transferred it in 1926 to its Queens Park storage site, where it remained until the 1960s, except for six years (1928–34) when it went to the gallery's Horsfall branch in the working-class district of Ancoats. As late as the 1960s, the Royal Institution of Cornwall sold off several Victorian pictures at Christie's, including Waterhouse's *Pandora* (now in the collection of Andrew Lloyd Webber). In 1942, when Christie's dispersed the important collection formed by the mustard purveyor, Sir Jeremiah Colman (1830–98), Burne-Jones's *Love and the Pilgrim* (1897) brought £20. The recovery of interest among private collectors can be traced through the auction prices brought by Waterhouse's *Ophelia* of 1894. The artist sold it to the collector George McCulloch for approximately £700, and in 1913 it left that collection for £472. In 1950 it fetched just £20, by 1969 £420, and two years later it increased sevenfold to £3,000. In 1982 it cost £75,000, and by 1993 £419,500. It last sold in 2000 for £1.6 million.

The corresponding rehabilitation of Victorian art among scholars began in Britain during the 1960s with a series of museum exhibitions and accompanying catalogues: these included Millais in 1967, Holman Hunt in 1969, Rossetti in 1973, Burne-Jones in 1975, Waterhouse in 1978, and Leighton as late as 1996.^[6] Tate's hugely popular exhibition of the Pre-Raphaelites in 1984 marked a turning point, one that was revisited at the same venue almost thirty years later in 2012.^[7] Similarly, the V&A's 2011 exhibition and catalogue, *The Cult of Beauty: The Aesthetic Movement 1860–1900*, constitute a fresh look at artworks first revisited by V&A curator Elizabeth Aslin four decades ago.^[8]

More slowly, the study of Victorian sculptors has begun to form a critical mass, beginning with a wave of books in the 1980s, followed by almost complete silence until the very late 1990s. David J. Getsy's *Body Doubles: Sculpture in Britain, 1877–1905* (2004), was the first lengthy representation of the "New Sculpture" since Susan Beattie's *The New Sculpture* of 1985; and Jason Edwards's *Alfred Gilbert's Aestheticism: Gilbert Amongst Whistler, Wilde, Leighton, Pater and Burne-Jones* (2006), re-examined this artist for the first time since Richard Dormant's 1985 monograph and 1986 exhibition catalogue.^[9] Other artists, notably Bertram MacKenna and C. J. Allen, have also been treated in exhibitions.^[10] In 2014–15, the Yale Center for British Art and Tate Britain presented *Sculpture Victorious: Art in an Age of Invention, 1837–1900* ([reviewed by Roberto C. Ferrari in *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* Spring 2015](#)), which was the first exhibition to consider sculpture synoptically across the Victorian period, and the first substantive publication since Benedict Read's *Victorian Sculpture* of 1984.^[11]

As this historiography indicates, Victorian art today constitutes a field of study that did not exist forty years ago. A new body of research now provides a platform that places the field on more equal footing with its twentieth-century counterpart. To date, a substantial proportion of that

research has, of necessity, taken a monographic approach, focusing on single figures, groups, or aesthetic trends, such as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the Aesthetic Movement, the Arts and Crafts Movement, or the New Sculpture. Reading across and between these artists, let alone beyond them, was not, until fairly recently, a primary concern. Until approximately the mid-1990s, the key objective was, of necessity, establishing the elemental building blocks of research.

The field has, however, begun to build on its own momentum and resources. Scholars have begun to question the meaning and limits of terms such as “Pre-Raphaelitism” (for instance, Michaela Giebelhausen and Tim Barringer’s edited anthology *Writing the Pre-Raphaelites: Text, Context, Subtext*, 2009); the monographic isolation of artists (Caroline Arscott’s *William Morris & Edward Burne-Jones: Interlacings*, 2008); the stability implied by labels such as “Arts and Crafts Movement” (Imogen Hart’s *Art and Crafts Objects*, 2010); or the assumed parochialism of artistic activity in Britain (Grace Brockington’s edited volume, *Internationalism and the Arts in Britain and Europe at the Fin De Siècle*, 2009).^[12]

Moreover, scholars have begun to address the Edwardian era, and innovative research has endeavored to define this “in-between” period. The essay volume, *The Edwardian Sense: Art, Design, and Performance in Britain, 1901–1910*, edited by Morna O’Neill and Michael Hatt (2010), the exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia (*The Edwardians: Secrets and Desires*, 2004), and a major exhibition at the Yale Center for British Art, accompanied by a Yale University Press book, *Edwardian Opulence* (2013), all attempted to define this specific cultural moment.^[13]

The Contexts of Victorian and Modernist Art

The rich interconnections of artistic works, lives, and ideas between and among hegemonic fields, and especially across period divides, have begun to be of increasing interest to scholars. Important scholarly interventions in that direction have been made recently by authors such as Jessica R. Feldman, Rachel Teukolsky, and Elizabeth Prettejohn.^[14]

But despite such inroads, the interdisciplinary and pan-cultural connections in the field have yet to be fully exploited. They remain to a large extent overwhelmed by deeply-entrenched, indeed institutionalized, frameworks of art history, which tend to favor neatly-defined compartments of study, such as clearly-bounded periods, stylistic labels, and named movements. Thus, on the most basic practical level, the process of attending to the links between these compartments does not occur naturally, but requires deliberate intervention; that is, it takes a conscious decision to return to primary documents and sources with the specific goal of exposing the smaller nuances and textures that exist between and among the thresholds superimposed by accidents of history.

The collection of essays presented here aims precisely both to highlight and unsettle the artificial boundaries that continue to lure scholarship into over-determined fields. While building upon the important work that has been carried out to date on these periods, this issue consciously situates its own endeavor in the interstices where a priori definitions by period become, to put it bluntly, untenable. The essays purposefully orient themselves towards the messier overlaps at the century’s turn, where boundaries are crossed, and where an unfolding of connections, continuities, and chance is taking place energetically and persistently in ways that point to the instability and artificiality of customary labels. The aim of this project is not so

much to reposition the Victorians as Modern, nor to prove the Victorianism of the Modernists (although some essays raise both of these possibilities), but rather, much more simply and directly, to look across periods and allow a sense of continuum—rather than the pre-empting of start and end points—to become a methodology for analyzing ideas about art. In other words, the approach is not an examination of what is “Victorian” or what is “Modernist,” but, on the contrary, a placement of those concerns and terms at one remove, so as to traverse the very points at which our frameworks of research usually demarcate a division. By doing so, the essays reorient some of the figures that have become familiar only in separate spheres.

Art Writing Before and After 1900

This collection does not claim to build any monolithic bridges between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but rather seeks to uncover (and recover) some of the subtleties that shaped the decades on either side of 1900. By actively looking for points of connection, and examining what they can tell us, it hopes to suggest some shifts in how we approach and frame our subjects. The reactionary polemics of the early 1900s, which declared the irrelevance of the Victorian past, have remained a compelling force. In many ways, the negative appraisals of Victorian art of the early twentieth century have been accepted in surprisingly good faith, taken almost at face value for over a century. What is missing, however, in the divided state of modern scholarship, is the deep familiarity with Victorian art in the new century, which so fundamentally underpinned the reactions it elicited. To return to our earlier example of the Vorticists, it is telling that a text as well-embedded into the story of Modernism as the *BLAST* manifesto is also one entirely segregated from the Victorian narrative that, after all, constitutes its meaning.

As art historians increasingly acknowledge, the very denial of the past also contains its reaffirmation, and this itself should prompt, rather than shut down, the question of what it is exactly that was so necessary to deny. *BLAST* is a case in point: its inclusion of individual names, places, and cultural terms—once absolutely current, now relatively obscure—suggests a specificity that is all but lost on us. For example, the line “BLAST pasty shadow cast by gigantic Boehm,” referring to Queen Victoria’s principal sculptor Joseph Edgar Boehm (1834–1890), is now taken as a simple dismissal of the outdated conventions of Victorian sculptors. But why Boehm? Dead since 1890, the legacy of this artist, whose name barely registers today, clearly still had a presence in 1914. Surely his invocation begs to be better understood if we are to claim any comprehension of his rejection. Perhaps a statement such as that of W. E. Sparkes, cited earlier, that the “vital power” of Victorian art would soon become recognized “in modern movements,” could be read not so much as a grandiose, overblown claim, but as an unpretentious conviction of the persistence of past cultures, and their inevitable reprisal. If Sparkes’s words would soon be turned around to effect the negation of the art he upheld, they also suggest a connection between the cultural facets of past and present.

Martina Droth is Associate Director of Research and Curator of Sculpture at the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven. Her work focuses on sculpture, in particular British nineteenth and twentieth century, with an emphasis on studio practice, materials, and modes of display. Prior to joining the Center, she was at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, UK. Most recently she co-

curated *Sculpture Victorious: Art in an Age of Invention, 1837–1901* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 2014; London: Tate Britain, 2015), and co-edited the accompanying book published by Yale University Press. Other recent projects include *Caro: Close Up* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 2012), and *Taking Shape: Finding Sculpture in the Decorative Arts* (Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 2008; Los Angeles: Getty Museum, 2009). Future projects include an exhibition of modern and contemporary ceramics, and an examination of the relationship between Henry Moore and Bill Brandt.

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Notes

- [1] W. E. Sparkes, "Painters and Pictures," *Practical Teacher* 29, no. 8 (February 1909): 401.
- [2] Wyndham Lewis, "Lord Leverhulme's Pictures: His Modern Favourites," *Blast: Review of the Great English Vortex* 74, no. 294 (June 1914): 18.
- [3] David Peters Corbett, "Visualizing the Right Question," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 11, no. 2 (Autumn 2006): 338–48.
- [4] Two important recent examples include Isobel Armstrong, "When Is a Victorian Poet Not a Victorian Poet? Poetry and the Politics of Subjectivity in the Long Nineteenth Century," *Victorian Studies* 43, no. 2 (2001): 279–92; and Susan Stanford Friedman, "Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modern/Modernity/Modernism," in *Modernism/Modernity* 8, no. 3 (September 2001): 493–513. Leonard Orr has pointed out the irony that these articles, which challenge the use of the terms "Victorian" and "Modern," both appeared in journals that are named exactly in those terms. See Leonard Orr, "Modernism and the Issue of Periodization," *Comparative Literature and Culture* 7, no. 1 (March 2005), 3.
- [5] Malcolm C. Salaman, *Studio* 82 (August 1921): 57.
- [6] *Millais* (Liverpool: Walker Art Gallery, 1967); *William Holman Hunt* (Liverpool: Walker Art Gallery, 1969); *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter and Poet* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1973); *Burne-Jones: The Paintings, Graphic and Decorative Work of Sir Edward Burne-Jones, 1833–1898* (London: Hayward Gallery, 1975); *John William Waterhouse RA, 1849–1917* (Sheffield: Mappin Art Gallery, 1978); and *Frederic Leighton 1830–1896* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1996).
- [7] *Pre-Raphaelites*, exh. cat. (London: The Tate Gallery and Penguin Books, 1984); and Tim Barringer, Jason Rosenfeld, and Alison Smith, eds., *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*, exh. cat. (London: Tate, 2012).
- [8] Stephen Calloway and Lynn Federle Orr, eds., *The Cult of Beauty: The Aesthetic Movement 1860–1900*, exh. cat. (London: V&A Publications, 2011); and Elizabeth Aslin, *The Aesthetic Movement: Prelude to Art Nouveau London* (London: Elek, 1969).

- [9] David J. Getsy, *Body Doubles: Sculpture in Britain, 1877–1905* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004); Susan Beattie, *The New Sculpture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983); Jason Edwards, *Alfred Gilbert's Aestheticism: Gilbert amongst Whistler, Wilde, Leighton, Pater and Burne-Jones* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); Richard Dormant, *Alfred Gilbert* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985); and Richard Dormant, *Alfred Gilbert, Sculptor and Goldsmith*, exh. cat. (London: Royal Academy, 1986).
- [10] Matthew H. Clough, ed., *C. J. Allen, 1862–1956: Sculptor and Teacher*, exh. cat. (Liverpool University Press, 2003); and Deborah Edwards, ed., *Bertram Mackennal*, exh. cat. and catalogue raisonné (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2007).
- [11] Martina Droth, Jason Edwards, and Michael Hatt, eds., *Sculpture Victorious: Art in an Age of Invention, 1837–1901* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).
- [12] Michaela Giebelhausen and Tim Barringer, eds., *Writing the Pre-Raphaelites: Text, Context, Subtext* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009); Caroline Arscott, *William Morris & Edward Burne-Jones: Interlacings* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008); Imogen Hart, *Arts and Crafts Objects* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010); and Grace Brockington, ed., *Internationalism and the Arts in Britain and Europe at the Fin De Siècle* (Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, 2009).
- [13] Morna O'Neill and Michael Hatt, eds., *The Edwardian Sense: Art, Design, and Performance in Britain, 1901–1910* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010); and Anne Gray and Ann Galbally, *The Edwardians: Secrets and Desires*, exh. cat. (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2004).
- [14] Jessica R. Feldman, *Victorian Modernism: Pragmatism and the Varieties of Aesthetic Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Rachel Teukolsky, *The Literate Eye: Victorian Art Writing and Modernist Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Art for Art's Sake: Aestheticism in Victorian Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); and Elizabeth Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate Publishing, 2000).