

# *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Katherine Faulkner

book review of

*Greece and Rome at the Crystal Palace: Classical Sculpture and Modern Britain, 1854–1936* by Kate Nichols

*Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 2015)

---

Citation: Katherine Faulkner, book review of *Greece and Rome at the Crystal Palace: Classical Sculpture and Modern Britain, 1854–1936* by Kate Nichols, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 2015), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn15/faulkner-reviews-greece-and-rome-at-the-crystal-palace>.

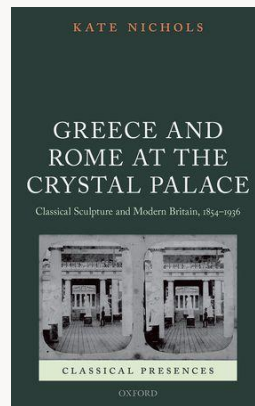
Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

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](#).



Kate Nichols,  
*Greece and Rome at the Crystal Palace: Classical Sculpture and Modern Britain, 1854-1936*.  
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.  
328 pp.; 33 b&w illus.; bibliography; index.  
\$110.00 / £70.00 (cloth)  
ISBN: 9780199596461

In the summer of 2013, Ni Zhaoxing, the owner of Shanghai-based real estate company ZhongRong holdings, announced plans to build an exact replica of Joseph Paxton's Crystal Place in Sydenham where the original structure had burned down in 1936. Instead of showcasing the latest developments in British technology and industry and didactic displays telling the history of art and architecture, the new 900,000 square foot glass and steel structure would now contain a sports centre, and, somewhat inevitably, 180 luxury apartments. [\[1\]](#) Those in favor of the project, including Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, claimed that rebuilding the Crystal Palace would "create much needed regeneration in the heart of the South London."[\[2\]](#) Others, such as the architecture critics Sam Jacob and Owen Hatherley saw the scheme as a twenty-first-century folly, suggesting that reconstructing the Crystal Palace would be equivalent to raising the dead, a form of jingoistic "zombie architecture."[\[3\]](#) In the end, not even designs by architectural stars such as David Chipperfield, Zaha Hadid, and Richard Rogers persuaded Bromley Borough Council to turn over metropolitan land to private developers. The project was scrapped in the spring of 2015. These arguments, particularly the promise of private capital to deliver facilities for the good of the public and the fears engendered by an inauthentic and superficial form of architecture, would have been familiar to Samuel Laing, the first director of the Crystal Palace Company, who oversaw the rebuilding of Paxton's dismantled exhibition hall in Sydenham in 1854. Articles discussing the ZhongRong enterprise, however, generally overlooked the eighty years the Crystal Palace stood in Sydenham, instead focusing on the six-month span of the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park in 1851.

As recent media coverage shows and as Kate Nichols points out in *Greece and Rome at the Crystal Palace*, the Sydenham Palace occupies a cultural and scholarly blind-spot. While the Great

Exhibition looms large in all areas of Victorian studies and in museum and exhibition history, the Sydenham Palace has only recently begun to be researched and analysed by historians. Nichols' book closely focuses on the representation of ancient Greece and Rome at the Sydenham Palace, particularly through sculpture and architecture, but at the same time she considers the broader significance of the Palace as a whole. A helpful introduction tells the story of the Sydenham Palace, from 1854 until 1936. The rebuilt palace opened to the public on June 10, 1854, but fell into difficulties by the 1870s before eventually being bought by the state in 1911. The Palace was then used as a training ground and demobilization centre for the Royal Navy between 1915 and 1920 and soon afterwards, housed the first iteration of the Imperial War Museum. Nichols is mainly concerned with the display of ancient Greek and Roman art and architecture in the Fine Art Courts in the nineteenth century, but her arguments are always framed by an understanding of how the Crystal Palace's history evolved. Her book sits alongside other recent work on revivals and reception history in the field of nineteenth-century studies and will be of interest to scholars and students working in areas such as exhibitions and entertainments, the history of archaeology and museums, national identity, and the reception of classical art and architecture in Victorian Britain.

Nichols begins her study with a tour of the Greek and Roman Courts in Sydenham, designed by Owen Jones, and the Pompeian Court by Matthew Digby Wyatt. Jones' designs for both the Greek and Roman court were based upon existing classical architecture, the Temple of Zeus at Nemea, and a combination of forms taken from the Coliseum, respectively. In the Greek Court, the central circulation area, known as the *Agora* was peopled by a selection of casts representing the goddess Venus, busts of poets, philosophers, and statesmen were arranged along the north and south side galleries and the back of the court was devoted to sections of the Parthenon Frieze, including a brightly and controversially painted section of the north frieze. In the Roman Court, sculptures of Diana and Venus from the Louvre occupied multi-colored faux-marble vestibules, while pride of place was given to the *Apollo Belvedere*. A further display area was also given over to Roman and Greek sculpture, but without any architectural setting. Wyatt's Pompeian Court gave visitors the opportunity to step into a reconstructed Pompeian house, an uncanny composite copy with no original.

The appearance and contents of, and reactions to, the Classical Courts are the basis from which Nichols addresses two broad questions: How did the status and understanding of classical sculpture and architecture change as a result of its being displayed to a mass audience at the Crystal Palace? And how was the Crystal Palace influenced and affected by classical culture? These issues are explored in each of the book's three parts. In Part I, Nichols investigates how scholarly knowledge was mediated and produced in the attempts to communicate the classical past to visitors to the Crystal Palace. The second and third parts of the book analyze manifestations of classical visual culture in contemporary nineteenth-century life, across the spheres of commercial, social, political, and personal life. Throughout her analyses, Nichols stresses the importance of understanding the representation of ancient Greece and Rome in the nineteenth century as a "two-way conversation." Sometimes the nineteenth-century voices dominate, heard through a wide range of primary sources, from official documents and published articles to diary entries, polemical pamphlets, letters, and personalia. The thoughts of the architects of the Fine Art Courts, Owen Jones and Matthew Digby Wyatt, are considered carefully, and the views of critics and experts such as John Ruskin, Harriet Martineau, and Elizabeth Eastlake, and artists like Edward Poynter, Richard Westmacott, Jr., and Lawrence Alma-Tadema are all given some prominence. But the reader

also meets Henrietta Thornhill, a middle-class diarist and frequent visitor to the Palace in the 1860s when she was in her twenties, and working class John Birch Thomas, who describes his time working at a toy stall in Sydenham in his autobiography. Nichols does not claim to have assembled a representative cast of visitors and commentators, but quotations from, and discussion of, this primary evidence bring the Palace to life and capture the diversity of experiences of and opinions. As Nichols points out in her conclusion, however, classical culture should not be considered as an “inert substance with no specific qualities of its own” and she traces how the classical past exerted itself on this most modern enterprise (248).

At the same time, Nichols’ arguments are informed by a close engagement with key theories and approaches from the fields of museology. This aspect of Nichols’ work comes across most clearly in the first chapter where she discusses the audiences who visited the classical Courts at Sydenham Palace. She is critical of concepts such as Tony Bennett’s “exhibitionary complex” and his Foucauldian understanding of power as a force seamlessly communicated from those who possess it to the audience.<sup>[4]</sup> As the diverse set of voices cited by Nichols suggests, the reactions to the classical Courts coalesce incoherently. In order to make sense of these differing perspectives it is essential to grant the audience agency. Similarly, Nichols points out the problems in thinking of a nineteenth-century exhibition in terms of Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of a museum or exhibition reproducing differences and distinctions between classes.<sup>[5]</sup> Instead, Nichols explains, the Crystal Palace at Sydenham provided a place of education and entertainment, which did not belong to any one social group, but performed different functions for a truly mass audience.

Nichols opens up a major area of new ground in her analyses of classical art and architecture’s impact on this mass audience. As Elizabeth Prettejohn and Vicky Coltman have recently shown, ancient Greek and Roman sculpture in particular, performed important educational, aesthetic and ideological roles in British institutions such as country houses, museums and universities in the nineteenth century.<sup>[6]</sup> Nichols looks beyond these elite sites to consider the significance of classical sculpture in popular culture and to those who did not possess a classical education. The reader learns what happens when young women like Henrietta Thornhill were granted access to classical sculpture often only seen by men, or how the Venuses of the Greek Court became a form of sex education to young working-class men like John Birch Thomas. Far from functioning as a tool for social control, Nichols demonstrates how visitors used the Crystal Palace for their own purposes.

Whatever the reactions of the various visitors to the Greek, Roman and Pompeian Courts, they were originally intended as a means of communicating the most up-to-date archaeological and art historical knowledge to a wide audience. As Nichols explains, visitors of all classes would have been familiar with the classical body in some form, whether via Madame Tussaud’s or the popular *Pose Plastique* shows in pubs and theatres around London. Two aspects of the display, the use of polychromy and the relationship between Greek and Roman sculpture, however, were drawn from cutting-edge debates in archaeology. Owen Jones’ decision to paint the North section of the Parthenon Frieze provoked outrage, although this was in tune with the latest archaeological evidence. The display in the Roman Court sparked debate about the status of the “Roman copy after a Greek original”, particularly the apparent inadequacy of Roman sculpture in comparison with the achievements of fifth-century Greek sculptors.

The contrast the classical Courts drew between the art of ancient Greece and Rome provides Nichols with rich material to explore what each civilization meant to Victorian audiences. Part III offers some of the most intriguing and original insights in Nichols' study as she discusses the Sydenham Palace, and specifically the Classical courts, in relation to national identity. Unlike a conventional, chronological museum display, visitors could navigate their way through the classical Courts in several directions. The arrangement of sculpture and architecture did not, Nichols argues, impart a straightforward and cautionary tale of progress, decline and fall. Comparisons were inevitably drawn between Victoria's empire and Roman power and rule, but the decadent empire was seen at a distance and within the reassuringly modern context of Paxton's glass and cast iron palace.

In admirably accessible language and tone, Nichols' book definitively makes a case for the significance of classical sculpture in multiple areas of nineteenth-century life, for a wide range of audiences, from university-trained archaeologists to autodidacts and from design reformers to artisans. As Nichols shows, classical art and architecture was held up as a model of beauty, comportment and moral fibre. In shedding light on the importance of the Classical Courts, Nichols never shies away from acknowledging the complex and entangled meanings that these sculptures held. These beliefs were not mere surface concealing a mechanistic and philistine society beneath, but were deeply rooted in cultures of art, education and knowledge.

Katherine Faulkner  
The Courtauld Institute of Art  
Katherine.faulkner[at]courtauld.ac.uk or Katie.r.faulkner[at]gmail.com

---

## Notes

- [1] Oliver Wainwright, "Raising the glass: Crystal Palace to come back from the dead," *The Guardian*, July 26, 2013, accessed July 10, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/jul/26/crystal-palace-rebuild-chinese-developer>.
- [2] Greater London Authority press release, "Mayor launches public consultation on plans to transform Crystal Palace sports centre," October 6 2014, accessed July 10 2015, <https://www.london.gov.uk/media/mayor-press-releases/2014/10/mayor-launches-public-consultation-on-plans-to-transform-crystal>.
- [3] See Sam Jacob, "We are surrounded by zombie architecture," *dezeen magazine*, August 1, 2013, accessed July 10 2015, <http://www.dezeen.com/2013/08/01/sam-jacob-opinion-crystal-palace-zombie-architecture/> and Owen Hatherley, "Plans to recreate the Crystal Palace are as Jingoistic as a Gove history lesson," *The Guardian*, July 29 2013, accessed July 10, 2015 <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/29/crystal-palace-replica-jingoistic-gove-london>.
- [4] Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1995).
- [5] See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. R. Nice (London: Routledge, 1984) and Bourdieu and Alan Darbel, *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and their Public*, trans. C. Beattie and N. Merriman (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).
- [6] See Vicky Coltman, *Classical Sculpture and the Culture of Collecting in Britain since 1760* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Elizabeth Prettejohn, *The Modernity of Ancient Sculpture: Greek Sculpture and Modern Art from Winckelmann to Picasso* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012) and most recently Ruth Guilding, *Why the English Collected Antique Sculpture, 1640-1840* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014).