

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Taylor J. Acosta

book review of

Victoria & Albert: Art & Love edited by Jonathan Marsden

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 10, no. 1 (Spring 2011)

Citation: Taylor J. Acosta, book review of *Victoria & Albert: Art & Love* edited by Jonathan Marsden, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 10, no. 1 (Spring 2011), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring11/victoria-a-albert-art-a-love>.

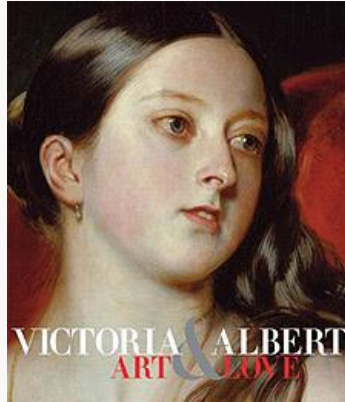
Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

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](#).



Victoria & Albert: Art & Love.

Edited by Jonathan Marsden.

London: Royal Collection Publications, 2010.

480 pp.; 476 color ills.; genealogical table; bibliography and appendices.

£59.95 (cloth)

ISBN 978-1-905686-21-6

The recent exhibition of works from the Royal Collection installed at The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace, is the first to feature and elaborate on the artistic pursuits of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, from the period of her accession in 1837 to the prince's death in 1861. The curators assembled some four hundred objects commissioned and collected by the royal couple, including Old Master and contemporary paintings and sculpture, jewelry, furniture, books, decoration, design, and photography. It is, as the Forward by Prince Charles asserts, a celebration of "the remarkable role that art played in their partnership of marriage" (7). The resultant publication, edited by Jonathan Marsden, is a valuable contribution to the field of Victorian studies, one which offers a practical and insightful introduction, beautifully illustrated and thoroughly annotated catalogue, genealogical table, and extensive bibliography, and is particularly bolstered by new research on the couple's private commissions and involvement with the Great Exhibition of 1851.

In addition to highlighting several great works from the Royal Collection in the tradition of two previous exhibitions, *Carlton House* in 1991 and *George III and Queen Charlotte* in 2004, director designate of the Queen's Works of Art Jonathan Marsden makes clear that the present project is driven by a revisionary impulse. First, it is the exhibition's aim to restore to public memory an image of the young and ambitious Victoria, a character who has all but been occluded by the reclusive widow held up as the 'Grandmother of Europe'. Second, Marsden hopes to augment the prevailing view of the collection as primarily the occupation of Prince Albert, a false conclusion that has historically been supported by the significant decrease in the number of royal commissions and acquisitions following Albert's death, and by the Queen's own declaration that she had always deferred to her husband in matters of art. While many reports have documented the Prince's formal education, scholarly approach to collecting, and significant role as a patron in both the private and public realms, Marsden offers up an

alternative narrative of artistic collaboration and exchange by emphasizing the number of works which were jointly commissioned or which entered the collection as gifts the couple bestowed upon one another for holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries, presenting what he perceives as the "sense of a collection being built in measured stages, largely by the mechanism of presentation, a strictly mutual process" (14). In fact, Marsden's record of the family history reveals that both the sovereign and her consort emerged from distinguished artistic genealogies.

Victoria and Albert were first cousins and shared the lineage of Franz Friedrich Anton, Duke of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld, who had collected prints, drawings, and books from a young age, and who founded the Print Room at Coburg, which included some three-hundred thousand prints and four-thousand drawings classified by artist and school and maintained by a designated curator. He was also a patron of the neoclassical furniture maker David Roentgen and his workshop at Neuwied. The Queen's paternal grandfather was King George III, from whom she inherited an impressive collection of Italian Old Master paintings and drawings accessioned from the holdings of Consul Joseph Smith and Cardinal Alessandro Albani. The Prince's maternal grandfather, Augustus, Duke of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg, made an extensive Grand Tour in 1768 with his brother Ernest II, later a patron of Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein and Jean-Antoine Houdon. Both Victoria and Albert were raised by single parents. Victoria's education was dictated by her mother, Victoria Mary Louisa, Duchess of Kent, and has been described by biographers as following the Kensington System, her exposure to culture restricted to what she observed at Kensington Palace, occasional exhibitions in London, and country houses throughout England. She studied painting with Richard Westall and was later tutored in matters of taste by her mentor William Lamb, Lord Melbourne. Albert enjoyed a much broader and more formal education, attending university at Brussels and Bonn and spending six months touring Italy. He was among the first generation of German students to attend lectures in the discipline of the history of art. Though diverse in the formation of their artistic inclinations, Marsden insists that it was a shared appreciation for the arts that was perhaps the most compelling and sustained source of communion between the Queen and her Prince.

The remainder of the introduction treats the history and specific conditions under which the Victorian contribution to the Royal Collection was formed. Queen Victoria was the first monarch to take up residence at Buckingham Palace, which was as yet unfinished at the start of her reign, and the couple placed great emphasis on the expansion and decoration of their quarters, entrusting an artistic adviser, Ludwig Gruner, to direct the completion of the State Rooms in a neo-Renaissance style. In 1842, the Queen and Prince began work on a small cottage in the garden of Buckingham Palace, collaborating with the Royal Commission on the Fine Arts, and using the pavilion as a space for experimentation and planning of fresco painting intended for new buildings at Westminster. Eight British artists were commissioned to decorate sections of the Garden Pavilion: Charles Eastlake, William Etty, Edwin Landseer, Clarkson Stanfield, Daniel Maclise, Thomas Uwins, C.R. Leslie, and Sir William Ross. Victoria and Albert were committed to contemporary art, and both national and international artists were regular figures at court, many of these encounters resulting in commissions.

The couple also made annual visits to the exhibition of the Royal Academy just in advance of the opening date, and often made purchases. However, the pair had relatively little to spend on

art compared to the aristocrats and new industrialists of their day, who were able to dominate the London market for sixteenth and seventeenth century Old Master pictures. The Queen set an annual budget for the acquisition of art, and although the collection does boast a number of commissioned works by a few living artists, namely Edwin Landseer, Franz Xaver Winterhalter, Mary Thornycroft and William Theed, their more usual practice was to purchase a single great work by an individual artist with their small resource pool, as with John Martin, George Cruikshank, Joseph Gibson, and William Calder Marshall.

The greatest testament to the legacy of artistic patronage of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert was The Great Exhibition, borne out of Albert's investment in the union of good design and new manufacturing techniques and conceived as a demonstration of the Works of Industry of all Nations. In 1850, a royal commission was formed to organize an exhibition that would celebrate international technological and artistic innovation on an unprecedented scale. The royal couple lent many pieces from their own collection to the exhibition, which are outlined in the catalogue's first appendix. And despite the prohibition on the sale and purchase of artworks within the exposition pavilion known as the Crystal Palace, the Queen made several significant acquisitions during her thirty-three visits to the show, including fine porcelain examples by Sèvres and Minton, sculpture, furniture, and jewelry.

Finally, Marsden demonstrates the Queen and Prince's high regard for the collection they inherited as much as for the collection they built, revealing that they were as attentive to issues of organization and display as they were to selection and acquisition. With Albert's assistance, Victoria first set about a project of recovery, overseeing the restoration, cataloguing, and installation of previously displaced works from the collection of George IV. She also contracted an official surveyor to prepare the first systematic inventory of the collection and to produce an early illustrated catalogue raisonné. The Prince dedicated himself to the organization of the Royal Library and establishment of a Print Room, as well as the historical organization of the picture galleries at Buckingham, Windsor, and St. James's, attentive to both framing and lighting. During Victoria's reign, the collection also gained in visibility and prominence through a series of engravings that replicated paintings in the royal holdings, the opening of Hampton Court Palace to the public by ticketed admission, and by loans made to every annual Royal Academy exhibition.

These themes of appreciation, patronage, and collaboration are further elaborated in the detailed entries, each comprised of an image, catalogue statement, and commentary, of the succeeding nineteen sections. The format parallels the organization of the exhibition's installation and demonstrates the breadth and depth of the royal couple's acquisitions.

"Portraits" provides an introduction to the Victorian contribution to an already very robust component of the greater Royal Collection. This section reveals that the couple actively commissioned both official court portraits and more private images, the latter regularly exchanged as gifts. The cover image (no. 14) is an example of an intimate reproduction of the young Queen, commissioned from Franz Xaver Winterhalter on the occasion of Albert's twenty-fourth birthday. In her journal, Victoria refers to this work as a "secret picture" that gave the young Prince much pleasure and was installed in his Writing Room at Windsor (67). Two more official depictions of the sovereign and her consort can be observed in a pair of

classically stylized marble sculptures by John Gibson and Emil Wolff, respectively (nos. 17 and 18).

The next two sections place further focus on their efforts in picture collecting. "Contemporary Painting and Sculpture" confirms their patronage of European and British artists. One standout is Frederic Leighton's *Cimabue's Madonna Carried in Procession* (no. 65), which according to Marsden would have appealed equally to both Queen and Prince, and was secured at the Royal Academy exhibition in 1855 (126–127). "Early Italian and Northern European Painting" was an area of particular interest to the Prince, who had spent time in Italy in his formative years during his own Grand Tour. Many of the works in this section were purchased with the assistance of Ludwig Gruner, an artistic adviser to the royal couple. While the collection expanded, so did the royal estates, as evidenced by the watercolors and photographs assembled under the headings "Architecture and Decoration" and "Balmoral and The Highlands."

"Music, Theater and Entertainment" highlights the couple's other mutual passions beyond the visual arts. Both Victoria and Albert were accomplished musicians, and composers such as Felix Mendelssohn visited the Palace on numerous occasions. Also included in the exhibition is one of Albert's own compositions, a manuscript of a song with piano accompaniment *Dem Fernen (To The Distant One)* (no. 150) annotated by Victoria: "Composed by dear Albert at Windsor Castle & sent to me by him Jan. 5. 1840" (226). An impressive acquisition is a gilded and ornamented S. & P. Erard Grand Piano (no. 146), selected as a showpiece and displayed in the White Drawing Room at Buckingham Palace.

The subsequent seven sections explore acquisitions in various disciplines of the applied arts: "Furniture", "Metalwork", "Ceramics", "State Jewelry", "Isignia", "Personal Jewelry", and "Textiles, Fans and Accessories". The final sections of the catalogue are devoted to the more personal affects of the collection, including "Souvenir Albums and Topography", which document the Queen's travels, "Views of the Great Exhibition", which features an impressive range of watercolor depictions of Albert's most significant project, "Photography", a new medium which the couple supported and engaged, "Books", and "Royal Artists", an assembly of the amateur works executed by members of the family themselves. The catalogue concludes appropriately with "Memorials to Prince Albert". The Prince Consort fell ill with typhoid fever in 1861 and died at the age of forty-two at Windsor Castle. This section includes two very different memorial sculptures commissioned upon the Prince's death, a monumental bronze effigy by Carlo, Baron Marochetti (no. 398) placed in the private mausoleum, and a more decorative and elaborate sculpture in marble and alabaster by William Theed (no. 399) that depicted the Prince as a knight in armor and was placed in the Albert Memorial Chapel.

Victoria & Albert: Art & Love effectively documents the "partnership of patronage" that uniquely characterized the Victorian reign. As Marsden recounts, "This shared and sustained activity, with the sovereign and her consort discussing and delighting in each other's choices in art, and in their arrangement and display over a period of almost twenty-two years, could be found nowhere else, and at no other stage in the history of the British crown" (50). The volume succeeds as an exercise in history, documentation, and connoisseurship.

Taylor J. Acosta
University of Minnesota
acost037[at]umn.edu