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book review of

The Classical Body in Romantic Britain by Cora Gilroy-Ware

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Cora Gilroy-Ware,
The Classical Body in Romantic Britain.
London: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art; New Haven: Yale University Press,
2020.
320 pp.; 109 b&w and color illus.; bibliography; index.
\$50.00 (hardcover)
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The Classical Body in Romantic Britain has a distinctive design. Tall and narrow, measuring 11 1/2 x 7 inches, the book does not look like the product of a university press. Skimming through it, one sees that this vertical design works beautifully for capturing images of whole-length sculptures, as well as portrait-style drawings, paintings, and prints. Conversely, works with landscape orientations seem diminished in scale. The cover design is also striking: against a black matte background, it dramatically juxtaposes two white marble sculptures with luminescent surfaces. A detail of John Gibson's *Psyche Carried by the Zephyrs* (design: 1822; this version: 1836–40) graces the front cover, while Thomas Banks's oval relief *Thetis and Her Nymphs Rising from the Sea to Console Achilles for the Loss of Patroclus* (plaster: 1777–78; marble: ca. 1805) is on the back. The choice of these sculptures for the cover is striking because they are mainly known only to specialists, yet they serve as apposite visual bookends to author Cora Gilroy-Ware's history of the development of the classical body over the course of about sixty years of British art, from around 1780 to around 1840.

Gibson's sculpture, in marble with traces of gilding, derives from Apuleius's tale of Psyche, who after discovering her lover Cupid's true identity, and succeeding in trials set before her by Venus to prove her love, is reunited with her husband. This sculpture is Psyche's triumph: the epehebic twin gods of the West wind carry her on their shoulders to Mount Olympus. The connoisseur and collector Sir George Beaumont commissioned the work in marble but died before it was completed and shown at the Royal Academy exhibition in 1827. That version is now lost; the one illustrated by Gilroy-Ware is from the Galleria Corsini, Rome. [1] Banks's work depicts a scene from the *Iliad*. The heroic male nude, grieving, reclines horizontally across the relief, while his mother and her fellow sea-nymphs, female nudes, float up from the water and into the sky. The physique of Achilles dominates the image, immediately suggestive of the influence of J. J. Winckelmann and the *exemplum virtutis* of the heroic figure in Neoclassical art. The anatomy of the female figures is less skillfully rendered, but their combined energies, as they float in serpentine motion up and around the inner surface of the

relief, are a tour de force in relief carving. Banks designed the plaster model in Rome, but the marble was not completed until after his death and is now in the Victoria & Albert Museum.

The dramatic design of this book might suggest that it is intended for the coffee-table, but Gilroy-Ware has in fact written a thought-provoking assessment of classical imagery in British art during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Her methodology, largely pluralistic but grounded in feminism and gender studies, connects an array of cultural forms and practices, including poetry, politics, aesthetics, racism, and sexism. Her interpretations and arguments are tenuous at times, but she succeeds in creating a new narrative in which to think about and appreciate the use of classical bodies.^[2] In her introduction, “Psyche’s Triumph: Toward a New Vocabulary,” she defines classical bodies as “the embodiment of an aesthetic convention rooted in the figurative sculpture of Greco-Roman antiquity,” but she quickly nuances this definition (1). Classical bodies were made in many styles and over centuries in antiquity, and they thus reflect different artistic and cultural traditions, as do their reinterpretations from the Renaissance to the modern period. Regarding the classical body in the years covered by her book, Gilroy-Ware has a strong thesis: it was the female form, rendered charming or eroticized, innocent or sensual, that best embodied the triumph of a classical art in this period, and it did so in a manner that emphasized skin, surface, and sensuality. This, she argues, was in reaction to—and fundamentally based on the failure of—classical bodies (predominantly male) designed around the period of the wars with France that were imbued, like vessels, with visions or ideologies about society and nature. So, to return to the cover, the nymphs in Bank’s relief, and not Achilles, pointed to the future of the classical body in British art.

Her exploration of the influence of Winckelmann is fascinating, particularly as she draws on “vulgar Winckelmannianism” (5), illuminating how specific British artists, driven by Revolutionary thought, absorbed political aspects to serve their particular needs from his paradigmatic study of antiquity, *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* (1755), first translated into English by Henry Fuseli in 1765 as *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks*.^[3] This, she contends, contrasted with later, more aesthetic concerns in British art, particularly after the Elgin Marbles arrived in London. Her consideration of “vulgar Winckelmannianism” provides an original perspective on its own, but she extends her thesis further by inventing a new vocabulary related to dreams and poems. This she derives from an 1819 poem, “The Fall of Hyperion,” by John Keats, in which he describes two different types of artists. Gilroy-Ware uses these terms to construct her own binary: “Dreamers” are those who hope for or aspire to something greater through their art; “Poets” are “sweet, sensual, smooth” classicists who recognize human limitations and use art to “pour out a balm” (xi, 24).^[4]

To justify her transformation of a Romantic poem into an aesthetic, Gilroy-Ware points out that Keats wrote about classicism, and his poetry has often served as a source for aesthetic ideas. In her preface she recounts an anecdote (later proven false by biographers) that upon Keats’s arrival in Rome in 1820 he carried with him a letter of introduction to Canova. Keats died from tuberculosis a few months later, foreclosing the possibility, as Gilroy-Ware describes it, for “two architects of a sweet, sensual classicism” to come together and marvel at the “smooth, candlelit limbs” of Canova’s marble masterpieces (xi). This sentimental scene reinforces in her mind the so-called victory of Poetic classicism in nineteenth-century art.

But Keats as a cultural and aesthetic force, while an intriguing idea, is somewhat problematic. Compared to peers like Shelley and Byron, Keats was a relatively inconsequential poet in his lifetime and only rediscovered by the Pre-Raphaelites in the late 1840s, in part due to Richard Monkton Milnes's 1848 biography on the poet. These Keatsian ideas, then, seem anachronistic, moved around in time to suit Gilroy-Ware's thesis, even though she contends these ideas were in the air. Strangely, after this introduction, Keats disappears until the conclusion of the book. Also Gilroy-Ware notes that Keats's poem "does not take sides in the conflict between the 'poet' and the 'dreamer'" (26), but she frames the "conflict" as an outright cultural war, categorizing artists and works of art as manifestations of Dreaming and Poetic classicism, polarizing them against one another.[5]

The book is divided into two parts: "Earth and Air" and "Stone and Flesh." Over the course of the first three chapters in Part 1, Gilroy-Ware illustrates her thesis with specific artists and subjects, while simultaneously constructing an iconographic genealogy of female forms. Chapter 1, entitled "Hidden Dreams," begins with an overview of the funerary monuments dedicated to military heroes in the wars with France, installed in St. Paul's, London, starting in 1796. Drawing on Whitney Davis's writings about the "spatio-temporal principle of an artwork," Gilroy-Ware sees these monuments as "trapped in time" (32).[6] Certainly, the lack of understanding of the making and history of these monuments on the part of today's public is partly to be blamed on the fact that there has been a longstanding prohibition against taking photographs in St. Paul's and Westminster Abbey because they are places of worship.[7] Gilroy-Ware sees this entrapment as endemic to the Dream spirit of the earliest monuments and their artists. In a well-researched and argued chapter, she focuses on works by John Bacon, Sr., and Banks. The former, a successful sculptor in London who ran a large studio, justified his inability to carve stone through the nationalistic logic that he was a true British sculptor because he had not learnt his art in Rome. Gilroy-Ware sees Bacon's Methodist background, and the enforcement of a strong work ethic for rewards in the afterlife, as the source of his Dream. In contrast, Banks is a Dreamer because of his support of democracy and his anti-war stance, commitments she sees in the marble body of his monument to Capt. Richard Rundle Burges (1798–1802), depicted rather surprisingly (even to contemporary eyes) as a naked warrior (a swathe of drapery absurdly covering his genitalia) who receives a sword from an allegorical winged figure of Victory. Gilroy-Ware discusses the impact of Banks's depiction of Burges as a classical male nude, considering how it was both accepted and eventually rejected over time, losing its power as a Dream sculpture as Banks's own revolutionary politics were glossed over by subsequent biographers.

The next chapter, "Poetic Departures," connects Banks with John Flaxman, discussing changes in the former's sculptures. She describes his monument to Capt. George Blagdon Westcott (1802–05), with its draped, dying figure, as "a less hopeful sculpture" than his Dream monument to Burges (71). Part of the death of this Dream was the rejection of the virile male nude as a vessel for democracy and revolution. She shifts attention then to Flaxman the Poet who, she argues, "drained Banks's Dream from the classical body" (75). She considers Flaxman's monuments in St. Paul's, but spends most of the chapter exploring the iconographic connection between the female figures in the relief by Bank described above and Flaxman's drawings, prints, and sculptures. Gilroy-Ware argues that Flaxman utilized the female body and its drapery as a way to enhance the sensual line that eventually dominated and exemplified Poetic classicism.

Chapter 3, “Industrial Dreams, Consumer Poems,” considers the connections between Banks’s and Flaxman’s female bodies and their popularity due to industrial culture, culminating in the 1851 Great Exhibition. This becomes most noteworthy, as Gilroy-Ware sees it, through the consumption of lithe, feminine bodies through mass-produced decorative objects. She focuses here on Henry Howard, a largely forgotten painter, though he was Professor of Painting at the Royal Academy 1833–47. A “sculptor’s painter,” as Gilroy-Ware dubs him, Howard specialized in capturing ancient marbles on paper, and he was praised by contemporaries for his “ability to marry the delineation of classical sculptural forms with the materiality of oil paint” (125–27). His figurative forms, almost always female, thus lent themselves to mass-production in prints, book illustrations, and decorative designs. [8] While she sees industry as a potential new type of Dream, she critiques Howard for not enforcing this Dream, preferring instead to be a fine art painter (i.e. a Poet) and failing as a result because he never evolved beyond the visual trope of entwined goddesses and nymphs derived from Flaxman and Banks. For Gilroy-Ware, Howard is a forgotten artist because he never “took sides” in the “war between Dreaming and Poetic approaches” (153).

To emphasize the impact of Howard’s lithe female forms, she illustrates the chapter with paintings and prints after Howard’s work, followed by the sweet serpentine form of Canova’s *Dancer with Finger on Chin* (1809–14), showing how this “Poetic” classical body permeated sculpture. This is followed, rather bizarrely, by a 2015 photograph of a Victoria’s Secret fashion show with lingerie-clad women embracing on a runway, and a reference to the “living sculptures of a wife and a daughter—during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign” (143). These personalized, contemporary references drop in throughout the book. While anachronistic, they sometimes, as in this instance, succeed in making clear her argument about Poetic beauty and consumption of the female body. The chapter ends with an astute comparison of the difference between Howard’s female bodies and the fleshy nudes of the painter William Etty, whose work, though controversial, was greatly appreciated artistically for its naturalistic—and British—aesthetic. According to Gilroy-Ware, where Howard failed, being neither a Dreamer nor a Poet, Etty succeeded, unintentionally being both.

Part 2 of the book focuses on Poetic classicism in two chapters. “Living Dreams and Poems,” the fourth chapter, is undoubtedly the most engrossing, as Gilroy-Ware explores racism as a challenge to the ideals of classicism. She covers two aspects of this inequality: the story of Saartjie Baartman, the Khoisan woman from the Cape of Good Hope whose body was displayed in London and branded the “Hottentot Venus,” and the story of “Wilson the Black,” an African-American sailor from Boston who after being discovered by the artist-anatomist Anthony Carlisle modeled for various artists, most notably the painter Benjamin Robert Haydon. Circulating through this discussion is the impact of the Elgin Marbles in England, perceived by artists almost immediately upon the sculptures’ arrival as a valuable tool for understanding naturalistic bodies as a pure embodiment of Greek civilization at its peak, undiluted by Hellenistic derivatives and Roman copies. Baartman’s tragic story is well-documented, so Gilroy-Ware reorients the idea of her exploited physiognomy as not necessarily alien, but an alternative type of classicism, one that potentially expands the definition of Poetic beauty. Her discussion of Wilson offers fascinating insights into the origins of systemic racism. That Haydon was a racist is not a surprise, but Gilroy-Ware cleverly parses out how his racism and arguments in favor of eugenics were entirely based on his own lies. She documents how, in his private notes, Haydon was amazed that Wilson’s

black body equaled, if not surpassed, the physiognomic classical ideal of the Elgin Marbles, but publicly he decried black bodies as inferior, physically and intellectually, to the marbles and the classical ideal. This exposé does more than just highlight Haydon's hypocrisy; it offers a glimpse into the history of eugenics and the intentional falsehoods upon which it has been built.

The final chapter, "Poetic Victory," considers what Gilroy-Ware sees in the post-Napoleonic period as the complete demise of the Dreaming classical body, invested with internal meaning, in favor of the Poetic classical body, with its emphasis on surface. She considers the influence of the Elgin Marbles on some artists, but then shifts her attention to the recurring motif of slick waxy surfaces by Antonio Canova and others that altered the course of British sculpture. She looks first at male bodies by artists such as John Graham Lough, John Charles Felix Rossi, and Richard Westmacott, in which "the muscular contours of the male body [turn] into a sensual Poetic surface," leaving the Dream ideal behind (213). The explosion of classical female over male bodies in art, however, is for Gilroy-Ware where the Poetic is most victorious. Depicted in various states of (un)dress, as Venuses, nymphs, huntresses, shepherdesses, and even Little Red Riding Hood, these figures, she argues, define the height of Poetic classicism in Britain. She considers works by Edward Hodges Baily, Joseph Gott, Richard James Wyatt, and Gibson in this vein. Her brief conclusion reinforces the idea of Psyche, first introduced with Gibson's sculpture, as a Poetic form that manifested itself in art. Lacking political or ideological meaning, Poetic art triumphed because of its timelessness and emphasis on surface-level beauty alone.

The Classical Body in Romantic Britain offers new ways of thinking about art in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain, challenging a long-standing historiography that has struggled to see in this period anything more than a so-called "Golden Age" dominated by the portraits of Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough, and Thomas Lawrence and landscapes by J. M. W. Turner and John Constable.^[9] The author offers understudied artists like Bacon, Etty, Haydon, and Howard refreshing and long-overdue scholarly attention. However, while artists like Banks are given extensive, detailed focus, there is an imbalance with other artists like Gibson, and the book at times reads and looks like an encyclopedic overview of works of art arranged by theme and form and selected to merely illustrate a thesis. For a narrative heavily grounded in sculpture, it is also startling that two major British sculptors of the time, Joseph Nollekens and Francis Chantrey, are relegated to nothing more than passing references in the text, with no illustrations of their work. Even if Gilroy-Ware felt these men were overstudied in the history of British art (which they are not), to disregard them completely leaves this reader wondering if she could not reconcile them, and potentially others, with the Dream-vs.-Poem framework.^[10]

Indeed, it is this binary that, for all its qualities as a thesis, actually begins to collapse under its own weight. Working with two opposing categories inevitably creates problems with artists and works that don't fit into them. To declare Howard a failure because he could not commit to either extreme is a mistake; appreciation of Howard's work depends, I would argue, on understanding that he followed his own path (as a Romantic artist, if you will), even though he worked with classical forms and was part of the artistic establishment.^[11] Robert Rosenblum established long ago that artistic anomalies challenge binaries like Classicism vs.

Romanticism (or, in this case, Dreams vs. Poems) and must be appreciated on their own terms.^[12]

In addition to the concerns presented here, the book has a number of scattered grammatical and typographical errors, now-normal faults, it seems, on the part of editors and authors apparently reliant on editing software. Despite my criticisms, I find that this book has great merits. Gilroy-Ware challenges longstanding interpretations, offers productive new ideas, and compellingly inserts new artists and works into the historiography of British art. The author is well-versed in primary sources and thoroughly incorporates secondary art historical literature and theoretical texts into her arguments. Future scholars likely will draw on Gilroy-Ware's theoretical framework of Dream and Poem. Indeed, *The Classical Body in Romantic Britain* is innovative in linking poetry to visual art, and through this cross-disciplinary approach presenting new modes of interpretation. From the cover to the conclusion, Gilroy-Ware's efforts at constructing a new way of thinking about classicism in British art ca. 1780–1840 is admirable and a welcome addition to the art-historical literature about this period.

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Notes

[1] The sculpture on the cover, also reproduced on page 23, is a later version commissioned by Prince Torlonia, distinctive for its traces of gilding, an early example of Gibson's experiments with polychromy. Gilroy-Ware does not distinguish between the two versions, nor are her discussions of Gibson's sculptures beyond *Psyche* always completely accurate. The *Tinted Venus* (19) is said to have been tinted in 1862, but this happened in 1851–53 and was on view in Gibson's studio in Rome before it was shown in London at the International Exhibition. *Love Disguised as a Shepherd Boy* (236), dated ca. 1836, was designed in the late 1820s and commissioned by Robert Peel in 1834. The *Wounded Amazon* (245) is given a date of ca. 1840–53; it was in fact designed in 1836, first exhibited in 1840, and the later version reproduced here completed in 1853. These errors suggest an imbalance in the author's research on many of the sculptures discussed. They also suggest a lack of understanding of the complexities of studio practice for sculptors, and by extension that patrons have particular tastes and that artists change their minds over time.

[2] The book is an updated version of her doctoral dissertation, although half the subjects discussed there are replaced by other artists in this book. See Cora Gilroy-Ware, "Marmorealities: Classical Nakedness in British Sculpture and Historical Paintings, 1798–1840" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of York, 2013).

[3] Her phrase "vulgar Winckelmannianism" originates in concepts of "vulgar Kantianism" and "vulgar Lockeanism" respectively crafted by David Bindman, *Warm Flesh, Cold Marble: Canova, Thorvaldsen and Their Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 1–2, and Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 76–77.

[4] The description of Poems for classical works of art was common even in the nineteenth century, with artists and critics referring to these types of works—Venuses, nymphs, shepherds, and the like—as "poetic subjects," meaning figures suggesting a narrative. Poetic subject matter also gave license to frequently depict figures as nudes. Gilroy-Ware does not mention this until her conclusion (240).

[5] Gilroy-Ware's use of Keats to underpin her thesis draws attention, then, to the "Romantic" part of her title. While the classical is well-defined, she seems to rely on preconceived awareness of Romanticism relating to literature and, broadly speaking, a general sense of culture. "Romantic Britain" and classicism, however, are said "to highlight . . . the coexistence

and interaction between radical and reactionary, inanimate and living, idealized and naturalistic, fanatical and fantastical, as well as the gradations in between” (xiii). A key source that might have helped reinforce this *Zeitgeist* approach is Hugh Honour’s foundational text *Romanticism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979). Surprisingly, this is not in her bibliography, although she does cite Honour’s essays on Canova and his book *Neo-classicism* (Harmondsmith, England: Penguin, 1968).

[6] Whitney Davis, “Eternal Moment: Pater on the Temporality of the Classical Ideal in Art,” in *Pater the Classicist: Classical Scholarship, Reception and Aestheticism*, eds. Charles Martindale, Stefano Evangelista, and Elizabeth Prettejohn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 81–100.

[7] The new academic project *Pantheons: Sculpture at St. Paul’s Cathedral*, based at the University of York and funded by the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council, will undoubtedly generate more attention to these sculptures with fresh ideas and ways of seeing them. For more on this project, see <http://pantheons-st-pauls.york.ac.uk/>, viewed August 6, 2020.

[8] Gilroy-Ware does not mention that Howard’s images of nymphs and other female forms also have been seen as the Romantic bridge between the mythological figures of Henry Fuseli and the Victorian fairy paintings of Richard Dadd and others, which is surprising as it would have added more credibility to her argument. See, for instance, Jeremy Maas, et al., *Victorian Fairy Painting* (London: Merrell, 1997).

[9] William Vaughan, *British Painting: The Golden Age from Hogarth to Turner* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999).

[10] Similarly, with so much emphasis on Canova and the influence of his waxy, sensual bodies on Poetic art, it is surprising that Bertel Thorvaldsen is not mentioned once in the entire book. Although his reputation grew after Canova’s death in 1822, he was working in Rome for more than twenty years by that time. His classical style is described as more austere than Canova’s, which might challenge her emphasis on the waxy surface. Thorvaldsen also had a more direct influence on Joseph Gott, Richard James Wyatt, and other British sculptors—including Gibson to some extent—than Canova, which might challenge Gilroy-Ware’s position of Canova as the chief influencer of Poetic classical bodies in Britain.

[11] See Honour, “Artist’s Life,” in *Romanticism*, 245–75.

[12] See, for instance, Robert Rosenblum, *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).