Reflections: Curating and Teaching the 19th-century at York Art Gallery

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My position as Friends of York Art Gallery Research Scholar from 2016-17 helped me to grow as a teacher and a scholar. This experience has been invaluable in developing my curatorial skills and talents as an educator. Under the direct supervision of Jennifer Alexander, Curator of Fine Art, the administrative tasks I completed on a weekly basis for the Gallery included responding to written and in-person enquiries from the public, filing new materials for the object files in the research room, and taking an inventory of all books owned by the Gallery for donation to the University of York library.

However, I dedicated the majority of my year at York Art Gallery to not only working on the two supporting displays for the feature exhibition *Albert Moore: Of Beauty and Aesthetics*, but also delivering related programming for visitors and for the Friends of York Art Gallery. This allowed me to deepen and apply my expertise in 19th-century British art, and more specifically Aestheticism. The theme of each room was assigned by Laura Turner, the Curator of Art, so I used this as the basis of my selection of works for the Moore Family display and the 19th-century Contemporaries display. Over the six months I was given to select and research the works that would be on view, I grappled with the rich artworks available to fulfil the task assigned to me: I was asked to curate the broad topic of British art in the 19th century. Therefore, I was responsible for educating visitors, be they art historians or not, on the mid-Victorian period and the development of styles concurrent with Albert Moore's work. Overall, the opportunity to take a major role in curating part of the Moore exhibition has made me a more confident scholar and curator; the skills and information I used in the process were complemented by my own

dissertation research on Frederic Leighton (1830–1896) and concurrent coursework during my MA year.

Regarding the contemporaries display, many of the works I selected had either not been exhibited for many years, or had never been exhibited. As many of them were completed by lesser-known or neglected artists, I contributed original research on the collection and highlighted the importance of ensuring these neglected artists were shown for the sake of educating. Even if an artist such as Joseph Walter West (1860–1933) is not part of the canon of "good" British art, it is important to show their works to instruct the public on the diverse range of styles and subject matter adopted by 19th-century British artists. In short, I honed my skills of presenting accurate information to the public in an accessible way, while balancing this with new approaches and research. This gave visitors insight into the newest and most recent scholarship in the academic realm of British Art Studies.

The research I completed for the two displays was well suited to my area of expertise in 19th-century British Victorian Art and Aestheticism. The narratives interwoven in the 'Moore's Contemporaries' display speak to Victorian Eclecticism, Pre-Raphaelitism, and Aestheticism. I believe the hang of the Contemporaries room did a good job of providing context for Albert Moore's Aestheticism in that it explains and visualises different forms and interpretations of the Aesthetic Style. I felt it was important to provide examples of the textures, textiles, and patterns that Aesthetic artists prioritised; in hopes of communicating that understanding Aestheticism as a distinct movement is essential to knowing the art of the Victorian Period. I also wanted to show that the "Victorian period" as a label is useful in a historical and literary sense; at the same time, art-historically, the Aesthetic Movement and other styles must be understood as distinct from

Victorian painting. One of the key ideas I hoped to convey in curating the two rooms was that Aestheticism is not always absent of narrative content, but rather more often replete with it.

For instance, I included *Lady of Fashion* (YORAG: 310) (Fig. 1) to demonstrate the sort of genre painting for which mid-Victorian art was known, and how even then we find the roots of Aestheticism. Between the 1850s and 1880s, although major changes took place in the way artists chose to depict form and the human body, textiles continued to feature as the main subject in works of art. In *The Lady of Fashion* by Joseph Laurens Dyckmans (1811–1888), we see a family gathered round a young woman examining the opulent textiles she's ordered. Based on the presence of the eager gentleman in the far left corner and the gold band on her right hand which could be an engagement ring, perhaps she is a woman soon to be married and beginning to acquire personal and decorative goods. This would demonstrate her prosperity and moreover, knowledge of expensive silks. The tripartite grouping of the woman and her family around the textiles draws our attention first to the wearer herself. She is posed for presentation to us as her audience, and also to the man sitting on the red velvet settee. Dyckmans emphasises the point of contact between the fingers of her left hand and the pink silk shawl that she wears. She opens up the garment, grasping it lightly, as if to show us how elegant she has become as a result of this purchase. We also might consider the father's expression as he assesses the probable high cost he has incurred with these new exotic materials.

One of the more crucial works in the show was Edward Burne-Jones' *Sleeping Maidens* (YORAG: R2478) (Fig. 2), which ties together the Pre-Raphaelites with the Aesthetic Movement and highlights the visual and technical similarities between Burne-Jones' and Albert Moore's work. Like Albert Moore's paintings of languid women posed in heavy transparent drapery, *Sleeping Maidens* presents some of the key tensions and concerns of the Aesthetic Movement as

it confuses the boundary between the sensuous and the sensual. The fluid white gowns the women wear reveal, rather than conceal, their bodies, outlined specifically at the upper thighs and calves. This sensuous appeal is heightened by the sensual gestures and points at which the women are layered on top of each other. The woman pressing her check into her companion's lap is resting soundly but her body is curved to envelope the other woman's right leg. The woman on the right is also in a peaceful slumber but she lifts her right hand, which seems to stroke the other's hair. Additional elements which give this picture its erotic and also sensuous undertones are the women's vulnerable positions: with their necks exposed and mouths open, as part of a series which tells the legend of Sleeping Beauty, they lie in wait for the prince to awaken them.

Sleeping Maidens was executed as a preparatory study for his *Briar Rose* series, now at the Faringdon Collection at Buscot Park. However, this specific study was done for *The Garden Court* (Fig. 3), a part of the series that was completed in 1894 because he did not finish it on time for the original group. One interpretation of *Sleeping Maidens* is that the series refers to Burne-Jones' uneasiness at the upcoming marriage of his daughter, Margaret, and that she is one of the *Maidens* who should remain peaceful and untouched. The women in this study and those in the finished works of the *Briar Rose* series were modelled after the artist's wife and daughter, so it is certainly possible. Burne-Jones repeatedly sketched bodies draped and layered on top of each other in order to explore this theme from about 1871 through 1890. For instance, two panels out of the series, *The Garden Court* and *The Rose Bower*, set in the Saloon Room at Buscot Park, at the time of the first Lord Faringdon, Mr. Alexander Henderson's residence (Fig. 4). Burne-Jones designed the carved gilt wood frames specifically for these pictures. Interestingly, he also had engraved on each of the frames a stanza of poetry which comprised the full poem "For the Briar

Rose," written by William Morris in 1891, with whom he was staying during this time at Kelmscott Manor.[1]

Furthermore, there is an absence in the scholarship on Burne-Jones' interest in gold, which becomes evident in his meticulous constructing of the gilded frames for *The Garden Court*. While we do know from his sketchbook dated from c. 1886-1894 that during this time, he took an interest in Byzantine art, there are a couple of watercolour and white chalk drawings of Aesthetic, draped women which remain unstudied. *Dancing Girls* (Fig. 5) and *A Reclining Female Figure* (Fig. 6) completed in the late 1890s are heightened with gold paint on dark tinted paper. I believe this is indicative of an earlier trend of Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic artists who became interested in incorporating gilded surfaces or gilded forms reminiscent of Byzantine churches and Byzantine icons into their paintings. In the case of Frederic Leighton, it was his visits to Venice and St. Mark's in the 1850s and 1860s which spurred his interest in the city's Byzantine heritage.

The other work in the Contemporaries display I would like to address is Joseph Walter West's *The Paroquet* or *Fine Feathers Make Fine Birds* (YORAG: 2007.1053) (Fig. 7). This work is significant to the display as it begins to establish the complexity of Victorian eclecticism, which was bound up in notions of defining Aesthetic beauty. Joseph Walter West was born in May 1860 in Hull. His artistic training was quite varied and shaped his style, which is somewhat of a French and English hybrid. West studied under Edwin Moore at Bootham School in York and later at the Royal Academy schools from 1884-1887, where he exhibited his work starting in 1885. West was conversant in a wide range of media. He completed oil and watercolour paintings, etchings, stipple engravings, murals, lithographs, book plates, and even illustrated

[1] Inscribed on *The Garden Court*: "The maiden pleasance of the land/Knoweth no stir of voice or hand,/No cup the sleeping waters fill,/The restless shuttle lieth still."

posters.[2] This watercolour, however, is more reminiscent of his etchings on paper. An article from 1902 in the *Magazine of Art* states he was skilled at designing and working in diverse media such as "book-plates…wall-papers, cloth covers, title-pages, end papers, lettering for sheet music, and decorative advertisements."[3] In the artist's own words, his style was based on a "capacity for appreciation" of the historical styles and artists who came before him.[4] Again in his own words, his influences include "the tender sympathy of a water-colour drawing by Mrs. Allingham and the masculine nobility of a Velasquez…open-air realism…and the decoration of Botticelli's supreme allegory of 'Spring'…the subtle breadth of Whistler, as well as the brilliant detail of an Albrecht Dürer."[5] With this in mind, it is safe to say that West, like other English artists at the time, was constantly reshaping his style based on the design and painterly influences of his British and European contemporaries and predecessors.

West's picture itself pays attention to colour and pattern. West emphasises the blues, greens, and purples in the room. He establishes a clear chromatic relationship between the turquoise vase and the delicate florals on the woman's dress, as well as the subtle glint of the chandelier, and finally, the explosion of colour in the parrot's bright, multi-coloured feathers. This creates unity in the picture and further advances its focus on the aesthetic qualities of 'feathers' and the ways in which pattern and colour become the picture's main subjects. The parrot is most likely a macaw based on the long train of feathers that make up its tail. Its train of feathers is depicted with long, deliberate sweeps of the paintbrush to convey the texture of its plumes. In contrast, the woman's face is touched by a visible blush and her hair is rendered in such detail that we can see each strand that makes up her magnificent hairstyle. Perhaps West

[2] Many of West's prints and bookplates are held in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum.
[3] Charles Hiatt, "Joseph Walter West and his Work," *The Magazine of Art* (Jan 1902): 435.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

chose to pose his model facing away from the viewer in order to display her own plumage more prominently. The large hair ornament positioned at the front of her head is probably an ostrich feather; along with the silk ribbon that trails past her shoulders, these were quite popular hair accessories in the Victorian period.

This picture is representative of the Aesthetic Movement in at least two ways. First, its title invokes the Aesthetic tradition of comparing and contrasting one's appearance with the moral or intellectual caliber of one's character. Second, it highlights the ornate fashions at the time, indicative of the booming fashion industry of late 19th-century France and England. For instance, the woman's dress patterned with stylized flowers recalls 18th-century French fashion during the time of Marie Antoinette's extravagant dresses and lavish taste. The lady in *Fine Feathers Make Fine Birds* wears a costume quite similar to what was known as the typical 'robe à la française,' a garment which was famous for its unrestrained decoration. This type of dress was worn by wealthy and fashionable ladies as daily attire from the 1740s until just before the French Revolution in 1789. It featured ruching and pleats or folds in the fabric, as well as a fitted top and voluminous lower half, which would accentuate the wearer's waist.

There is one example of this kind of French 18th-century textile in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which shows us how the front of the dress in West's painting might have looked (Fig. 8). It is characterised by a wide neckline truncated with a triangular bodice, flowing elbow length sleeves often adorned with lace, and a highly detailed embroidery or printed pattern. Interestingly, I found an English textile from around the same time that bears a similar floral pattern (Fig. 9), so you can see the regular sartorial exchange between English and French fashion designers and artists.

My interest in 19th-century material culture and depictions of fashion in painting led me to make an appointment to view the collections of the York Castle Museum in store. Although this turned out to be for research purposes only, it was an instructive exercise all the same to work with Robert Wake, Collections Facilitator, accompanied by Jennifer Alexander. We looked at items of 19th-century British clothing and jewellery—such as ostrich feather boas, cameos, and peacock feather fans—that would have been influential to Aesthetic painters. Moreover, familiarizing myself with the Castle Museum's collections proved extremely helpful in solving a mystery essential to the success of my dissertation; I was able to contact Robert Wake, who combed through the textile collection to locate and photograph a shot silk Regency dress (c. 1815) quite similar to the dress worn by the woman in the central painting of my project, *After Vespers* (Fig. 10) of 1871 by Frederic Leighton.

Along a different vein, throughout the second half of my placement at York Art Gallery, I had the pleasure of working closely with the Welcome Team and focusing my attentions on education projects. I was able to not only discuss my research and the main ideas of my two displays with them during a training session, but I also collaborated with them on the Community Chest. After giving my final gallery talk on the 24th May, I was granted permission to pursue my self-outlined project of curating the Community Chest, with the guidance of Jennifer Alexander and Gaby Lees, Assistant Curator of Arts Learning. This was a highly rewarding experience in which I facilitated the Welcome Team's selection of several works on paper and their contribution to the accompanying guide book. I made a great effort to plan out every step of the process, and maintained three guiding principles along the way: be facilitative, allow the Welcome Team as much agency as possible when selecting the works on paper and writing their corresponding entry for the guide book, and give positive reinforcement whenever

possible. My overarching, two-pronged goal in curating the Community Chest was not only to introduce works on paper on which we had little information or had not been exhibited, but also to engage the Welcome Team in such a way that would help them express and articulate their interest in their chosen artwork. The most challenging stage of the project was helping the Welcome Team to narrow their selection down to one or two pieces. As I left the tone and style of the entry to their discretion, the final text was an interesting compilation of voices and genres.

In conclusion, accepting the challenge of curating and communicating the competing and concurrent narratives that underpin 19th-century British Art has been exhilarating. In my attempt to emphasise the collaboration among Aesthetic artists with my displays, as well as my role in overseeing the Community Chest, I have gained experiences formative in shaping my teaching and curatorial philosophy. In the future, I will continue to present the most current research in the field as new museum education and access programs emerge, perhaps demanding more than ever that curators and educators explore unwritten, alternative, or unpopular histories in our work.

Illustrations.

Figure 1. Joseph Laurens Dyckmans, *Lady of Fashion*, 1854. Oil on canvas. 82.6 x 74.9 cm. York Art Gallery. YORAG: 310.

Figure 2. Edward Burne-Jones, *Sleeping Maidens*, 1871. Watercolour and bodycolour in brown and white on blue paper. York Art Gallery. YORAG: R2478.

Figure 3. Burne-Jones, *The Garden Court* (from the *Briar Rose* series), 1894. Bristol Museums and Art Gallery. 126.3 x 237.4 cm. Image: ArtUK.

Figure 4. Burne-Jones, *The Garden Court* (top) and *The Rose Bower* (bottom), panels in the Saloon Room, c. 1870–1890. Oil on canvas in carved gilt wood frames. Faringdon Collection, Buscot Park. Images: Buscot Park & the Faringdon Collection, National Trust, http://www.buscot-park.com/house/the-saloon.

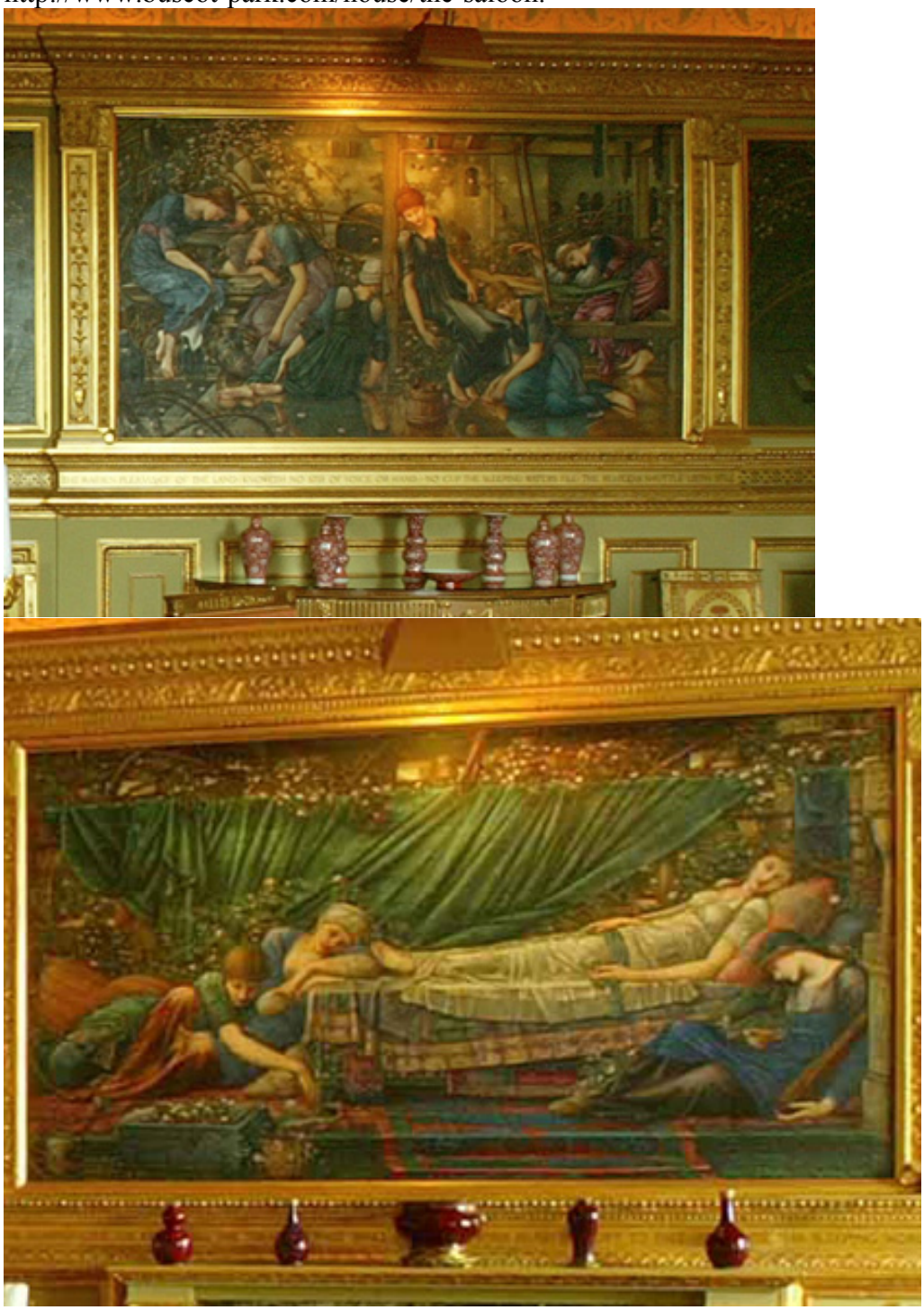

Figure 5. Burne-Jones, *Dancing Girls*, 1898. White and blue chalk, gouache, with gold paint on purple-tinted paper. 23.5 x 32.5 cm. Private collection. Image: Sotheby's, http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2013/british-irish-art-l13133/lot.4.html.

Figure 6. Burne-Jones, *A Reclining Female Figure*, 1890s. Watercolour with gold paint on dark blue paper. 16 x 24. Private collection. Image: Sotheby's, http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2007/victorian-edwardian-art-l07131/lot.17.html.

Figure 7. Joseph Walter West, *The Paroquet* or *Fine Feathers Make Fine Birds*, 1890s. Watercolour on paper. York Art Gallery. YORAG: 2007.1053.

Figure 8. *Robe à la française*, 1760. Embroidered silk and satin gown, French. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Image: National Geographic, "Marie Antoinette's Style Revolution," https://www.nationalgeographic.com/archaeology-and-history/magazine/2016/09-10/daily-life-france-fashion-marie-antoinette/.

Figure 9. English Textile (from Spitalfields) with design of floral bouquets and meanders, ca. 1760. Silk and metallic yarn brocaded on silk damask ground. 228.6 x 53.34 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Image: http://collections.lacma.org/node/233688.

Figure 10. Leighton, *After Vespers*, 1871. Oil on canvas. (Frame) 161.9 x 122.6 cm. Princeton University Art Museum.