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Aesthetic Painting in Britain and America: Collectors, Art Worlds, Networks

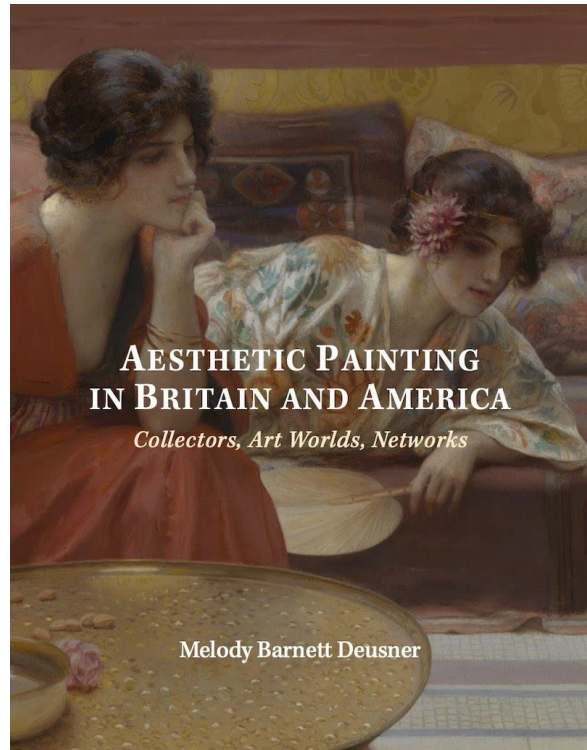
by **Melody Barnett Deusner**

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Melody Barnett Deusner comes to her latest scholarly project after having published several important essays and book chapters on the entanglements of art making, aesthetic taste, financial investments, and patronage in the Gilded Age transatlantic sphere. She has developed a compelling practice of taking a seemingly innocuous object or place—namely the Greco-Roman *exedra* and the New York social club—to show how collectors envisioned art not only as aesthetic entity but also as sociopolitical currency, which they often used to bolster their social status or political ideologies. In *Aesthetic Painting in Britain and America: Collectors, Art Worlds, Networks*, Deusner maintains her hermeneutic focus on the public and private arenas in which objects were originally presented while never losing touch with the primacy of art. A recent site of inspiration was James Abbott McNeill Whistler's Peacock Room. As Deusner looked for precisely the right words to describe the gold-patterned, blue-leather wall panels behind the gilt wooden shelves, crowned with an array of porcelain vases, and the relationships of these decorative objects to Whistler's *La Princesse du pays de la porcelaine* (1863–65), one surprisingly modern adjective persistently came to mind: “networked.” Turning to scholarly research, Deusner was surprised to discover that several nineteenth-century critics had used the word to characterize intertwined relationships among artists, patrons, and society. Thus, it became the shibboleth for her most impressive publication to date.

Deusner is careful to affirm existing scholarship on the Aesthetic Movement, which has established that an art-for-art's-sake worldview inspired many artists to produce beautiful visual “escapes” from the pressures of industrialization in England and America. In reexamining these doctrines, however, Deusner suggests that Aestheticism is not a style but,



rather, a “manifestation of system as style” (12). Inspired by Pierre Bourdieu’s and Michael Baxandall’s sociological work on aesthetics, she seeks out “the larger constellations of cultural preferences and day-to-day experiences within which a love of ‘art for art’s sake’ was situated” (18). For Deusner, Aesthetic Movement patrons deployed art to cultivate personal and professional relationships, an idea familiar today, when owning representative works by a handful of “star” artists positions the collector within an elite social orbit. And just as the contemporary collector helps to establish the list of most wanted artworks, so too did Gilded Age collectors have a hand—often a decisive one—in determining which artists represent the period, artists who thereafter became the subjects of art-historical studies. The influential role of the collector means that, when studying Aesthetic movement art, we must simultaneously bear in mind “artistic praxis, decorative function, individual perception, and social engagement” (18).

The first case study to advance Deusner’s prismatic perspective on the Aesthetic Movement entails the relationship between Sir Edward Burne-Jones and Sir Arthur James Balfour, the British Conservative best known for the 1917 Balfour Declaration. The Burne-Jones/Balfour link echoes in the artist’s gauzy *Portrait of Lady Frances Balfour* (1881), whose subject married Balfour’s younger brother. While in his writing Balfour offers only prosaic ruminations on our inability to “acquiesce in any attempt at explanation” when we are “stirred” “by some beautiful object,” he put his motto on aesthetics—“Pictures should be ‘lived in’”—to work when collaborating with Burne-Jones on the decoration of his private homes and, after becoming Prime Minister in 1902, 10 Downing Street.¹

In arguing for the centrality of this friendship to Balfour’s social and political network, Deusner wisely avoids linking episodes in the life of Perseus, the subject of the mural Burne-Jones painted for Balfour, to the statesman himself. Instead, she argues that these mural paintings “encouraged interactions” in Balfour’s home, especially among the “Souls,” a “group of clever men and pretty women,” as the poet and Souls member Wilfrid Scawen Blunt described them, that flourished in a self-described “elective affinity” from around 1885 to 1900. Deusner convenes several types of evidence to advance her argument: Burne-Jones alluded to a “Souls’ worldview” by depicting spiritual and chivalric themes, and passionate but platonic friendships, which the Souls shared; he was a regular guest at Souls’ parties; and it was their mutual admiration for his work that, in part, bound the members. Deusner builds on the scholarship of Caroline Arscott, who has argued, in Deusner’s words, that “dense, complex pattern designs” in William Morris’s wallpaper “exemplify” the artist’s “dedication to the creation and nourishment of non-hierarchical socialistic communities” (58). While we may accept the basic tenets of this reading, it becomes somewhat less convincing when Deusner likens the Morris wallpaper that Balfour selected to fill the spaces between his Perseus pictures to the sociopolitical homogeneity of the Souls (58–59). When she argues that the kindred faces in Burne-Jones’s paintings mirror the tightly knit identity of Souls’ membership, one might reasonably wonder if the same principle applies to all artists who painted doppelgängers, such as Botticelli, Utamaro, even Willem de Kooning. But these are minor oversteps in a chapter replete with fresh ideas that challenge those who reproach the homogeneity of Burne-Jones’s work. Ultimately, Deusner offers a new perspective on the visual rhetoric of networked unity at the center of Souls’ interrelationships.

Electrical networks ground chapter two; Deusner galvanizes them in the story of the Grosvenor Gallery. Founded by Sir Coutts Lindsay in 1877, the Grosvenor was London’s first electric power station and a refuge for those Aesthetic Movement artists who had been

rejected by the conservative Royal Academy. It was, famously, during the Grosvenor's inaugural exhibition that John Ruskin first laid eyes on Whistler's *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket*; his flippant description of its construction launched one of the greatest libel trials (and Pyrrhic victories) of the nineteenth century. Two points stand out: first, while we tend to link the Aesthetic Movement to the homespun aesthetic of the Middle Ages, Deusner reveals its intimate connection to electricity and, implicitly, to modernism. Moreover, Deusner argues that electric lighting suited the shallow spaces and seriality of the paintings. A few uncertainties arise here. As Deusner admits, most visitors attended Grosvenor exhibitions during the day, when electric lights were not needed; also, the press had little to say about the effects of this new, powerful illuminant on the pictures (90). Worse still, the Grosvenor electric system often collapsed and wreaked havoc on the neighborhood; it irrevocably broke down around 1887, which drove Lindsay to bankruptcy. Deusner helpfully argues that the failure of the Grosvenor was due in part to the founder's "obsession with electric lights," a fact not acknowledged in previous scholarship on this significant topic. She ends this section on an equitable playing field: despite these technological failures, the Grosvenor "provided a freshly visible exemplar of the potential gains and dangers posed by new types of cultural, technological, and corporate networked interconnection and control" (105).

The Grosvenor's faulty wiring presaged some of the broken circuits of the Aesthetic Movement in America, the subject of Deusner's third chapter. Deusner astutely unpacks essential contradictions in this story. Some of the most impressive paintings—namely, those installed as decorative ensembles in England—could not travel. Those that made it to America were often damaged in transit and could not be exhibited. Moreover, Americans were notoriously fickle in their appreciation of Aesthetic Movement art; while some welcomed it, those leery of the British for sending their "treasures" across the Atlantic translated their dismay into denunciation. And even though Ruskin inspired countless American artists, his favorite works of British art left most Americans indifferent, if not suspicious of their decorative nature (128–29). To complicate matters, during the 1870s most Americans learned of Aesthetic Movement art through Henry Blackburn's photomechanically reproduced drawings, which failed to capture the color and detail of the originals. Blackburn's inept version of *King Copethua and the Beggar Maid*, which Burne-Jones, not surprisingly, refused to sanction, was nevertheless produced and circulated. While the Aesthetic Movement flourished throughout nineteenth-century America, British paintings, particularly when translated through Blackburn's pen, struggled to find an American market.

Deusner's final two chapters are her strongest; they focus on more successful efforts to forge social and economic networks through art. In chapter four, Deusner shows how a group of New York-based Gilded Age businessmen, all art amateurs, deftly wrested power from artists and art dealers to shape the art world to their preferences and, in Deusner's words, "to demonstrate their connoisseurial bona fides" (148). Her case studies are Thomas B. Clarke, William T. Evans, and George A. Hearn, all of whom manufactured linen and lace or sold dry goods (including clothes), and all of whom formed important art collections. They showed work from their collections not only, as expected, to their friends and colleagues in their homes but also at private social clubs, such as the Union League Club in New York and the Boston Art Club. In these more public settings, works of art functioned, in Hamilton Fish's phrase, as "aesthetic agents," where they reinforced the social distinction of collectors and their status within the economic elite and, simultaneously, helped to shape the

character of the art market. The images in the paintings themselves even served this goal by representing or alluding to the theme of meticulous selection. For example, Charles Caryl Coleman's *Quince Blossoms* (1878) presents a carefully curated ensemble of Far Eastern vases, Middle Eastern textiles, and a carp fan; in Francis Davis Millet's *The Connoisseur* (1885), a classically garbed woman sagaciously examines a Chinese vase. Building on the scholarship of Sarah Burns, Lee Glazer, Barbara Weinberg, and others, Deusner persuasively argues that Gilded Age collectors coveted these types of paintings as emblems of the specific skills required to succeed in their businesses and as art collectors: "the ability to select, compare, and arrange fine things" (158).

Charles Lang Freer takes center stage in chapter five as the art collector/businessman most entwined in Gilded Age networks. Deusner shows how Freer strategically used his relationships with artists to nourish his commercial enterprises. A sequence of landscape paintings by Dwight Tryon, for example, embodied the kind of "organic linking and multidirectional growth" that Freer envisioned for the arterial expansion of his train lines. No passive collector of art, Freer worked with his coterie of artists to create ensembles of paintings for his home that would "suggest, and in many ways enact, a world connected" (190). Admittedly, few people would gaze at these arcadian landscapes and think: "corporate restructuring" (198). Moreover, Deusner does not address the troubling disconnect between the pictured Edenic terrains in Freer's paintings and the concurrent, savage destruction of the American landscape, including its Indigenous residents and their homelands, inflicted by the transcontinental "settlement" of the West.² Still, Deusner advances her cause by explaining that Freer advised his business associates to collect Tonalist art and that they "passed the paintings hand to hand within their sympathetic circle" (206). Moreover, Freer's artists were involved in his business ventures. These examples underscore Deusner's theory that the artists and patrons shared a visual and conceptual rhetoric; they profited, in more ways than one, from the safety of operating in a tightly knit network.

Writing with grace and clarity on a foundation of substantial, new, first-rate research, Deusner expertly peels back the veneer from British and American Aesthetic paintings, revealing them as far more complex entities than their decorative countenances first suggest. She mines auction data, museum and business records, exhibition catalogues, letters, and countless other primary sources to expose a great deal of the original environments—physical, social, political, economic, and even psychological—in which these paintings were produced, collected, and exhibited. She exposes the cunning strategies of those Gilded Age, protomodern collectors who surrounded themselves with works of art designed to promote their sociopolitical identities and of others who systematically manipulated the art world to enhance their already considerable fortunes and social standing. Transcending the nationalistic borders of American and British art in exemplary fashion, Deusner sheds new light on broad, international patterns of art-market manipulation and contributes to the growing literature on nineteenth-century cross-cultural artistic exchanges. Her study will surely inspire curators and historians to challenge the limited frameworks of individual collections and to interrogate and reveal even more of the overlooked identities and historical practices that constitute the true story of the Aesthetic Movement.

Notes

¹ Sir Arthur James Balfour, *The Foundations of Belief: Being Notes Introductory to the Study of Theology* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1895), 65.

² On this topic, see, for example, William Cronon et al., eds., *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992) and David E. Nye, *Conflicted American Landscapes* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021).