

**Alfred Gilbert's Aestheticism: Gilbert Amongst Whistler, Wilde, Leighton, Pater and Burne-Jones**, by Jason Edwards; pp. 272. Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2006, £55.00, \$99.95.

Jason Edwards's monograph on the Victorian sculptor Alfred Gilbert challenges the Renaissance myth of the solitary sculptor. The book positions Gilbert among many of the leading figures of late-nineteenth-century aestheticism; along with the names listed in the title, A. C. Swinburne, Simeon Solomon, J. A. Symonds, Edmund Gosse, Gilbert and Sullivan, Bram Stoker, Henry Irving, and G. F. Watts figure prominently. Only in the final chapter, dealing with the bankrupt artist's exodus to Bruges at the beginning of the twentieth century, does Gilbert retreat into a Huysmanian solitary exile of aestheticism, and that exile proves artistically barren. Both the artist and his works emerge from Edwards's book as the products of a lively homosocial London ambience; Gilbert's highly daring and provocative statuettes and public monuments are represented as the results of an ongoing dialogue about aesthetic and masculine ideals within a wide circle of artists. Although Gilbert is the undisputed protagonist of Edwards's study, this is, indeed, as much a book about the complex web of queer undercurrents in British aestheticism across the disciplines, and it therefore deserves a much wider readership than a strictly art historical one.

Edwards has structured his book chronologically, with a chapter devoted to each of Gilbert's major works from 1882 until the end of the nineteenth century: *Perseus Arming* (1882), *Icarus* (1884), *Eros* (1885-93), *Comedy and Tragedy* (1891-92), and *The Clarence Memorial Tomb* (1892-1928). Edwards's readings of these works are as involved with text and context as they are with sculpture. By thus placing Gilbert's sculpture within literary and painterly aestheticism, Edwards grounds Gilbert's works in their cultural contexts far more deeply than previous studies of the sculptor. His readings of texts, contexts, and sculptures is consistently queer; indeed, as he himself points out in his introduction, some readers may find his readings "wilfully 'perverse'. Perhaps they are, in as much as they self-consciously refuse the notion of 'the' nineteenth-century viewer, at least one with so-called Victorian values, and instead foreground the potential and very particular bodily, erotic, sexual, and aesthetic experiences of a subset of Gilbert's queerer viewers that have to date been marginalized in mainstream academic scholarship" (14).

The book pays homage to such queer readings of texts and art works as those carried out over the last decade by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michael Hatt, Whitney Davis, David Getsy, and Alex Potts. Edwards thus aligns himself with the recent phenomenological turn in the study of sculpture: a thorough understanding of sculpture rests on an understanding of sculptures as bodies in space, a space that encompasses both the sculptural body and the body of the viewer. Consequently, an important aspect of his book is the discussion of the place of sculpture within the private queer space of the artist's home and the Victorian aesthetic interior; within such aesthetic exhibition spaces as the Grosvenor Gallery and the Royal Academy; and within such open public spaces as Picadilly Circus, so heavily charged with homosocial or homosexual activities. Edwards provides an excellent reading of William Powell Frith's *A Private View at the Royal Academy* (1881), pointing out the subtle shades of dandyism from Frederic Leighton to Oscar Wilde and the various degrees of female aesthetic spectatorship.

In its concern with the representation of Victorian masculinities Edwards's book emerges as a natural sequel to the many studies on the subject produced in the course of

the 1990s. The slender, boyish, and at times, effete bodies of Gilbert's statues are both traced back to their Florentine origins in the sculptures of Donatello and Cellini, and placed in the context of the loose wrists of aesthetic teapots and the equally loose-wristed followers of the fleshly poet Bunthorne in Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta *Patience* (1881). While the coupling of the camp, the queer, and the homosocial/homosexual is extremely well-documented and discussed in its late-nineteenth-century context, the craze for neo-Florentine sculpture might usefully have been further substantiated by a discussion of the queerness of certain of Donatello and Cellini's works and the homosocial, even homosexual, context in which they were created. Although these issues have only been dealt with in fairly recent scholarship, there is little doubt that the homoerotic discourse implied in those sculptures was picked up by the late-nineteenth-century aesthetic audience. To Gilbert, Leighton, Symonds, Walter Pater, and Wilde, Florentine Renaissance sculpture was almost synonymous with queer sculpture, perhaps queerer to them than to the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century communities in which they were created.

So is the reader provoked by Edwards's "wilfully perverted" readings of Gilbert and late-nineteenth-century aestheticism? This reader certainly is not, for the book is strident, clear, very consistent in its argument, and on the whole extremely well-documented, well-researched, and well-illustrated. Only occasionally does such a biased reading result in somewhat simplistic interpretations. Pater's pervasive influence on aestheticism and late-nineteenth-century queer culture is alluded to throughout Edwards's book, and indeed, can hardly be questioned after the rich documentation of the last two decades of Pater scholarship. Yet Pater is so often quoted out of context—that is, the context of his own texts—and is instead represented by a string of "Paterian" words and concepts which are too frequently employed in an exclusively homoerotic discourse. Allusions to Pater's Greek essays and the essays in *The Renaissance* (1873) tend to take for granted that Pater's main message is queer. Such a reading neglects much of the density and complexity of Pater's ideas and of his writings. Still, this is a study of Gilbert in the context of British aestheticism, and given the wide range of late-nineteenth-century figures Edwards includes in his book, it is perhaps inevitable that the occasional brushstroke becomes a little too broad. The real achievement of the book is its transformation of late-Victorian sculpture from an isolated art form into an art fully integrated in and expressive of British aestheticism.

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