

Jason Edwards *Alfred Gilbert's Aestheticism: Gilbert Amongst Whistler, Wilde, Leighton, Pater and Burne-Jones* review

December 10, 2008

[Susan P. Casteras](#)

Both Jason Edwards's *Alfred Gilbert's Aestheticism: Gilbert Amongst Whistler, Wilde, Leighton, Pater and Burne-Jones* and Elizabeth Prettejohn's *Art for Art's Sake: Aestheticism in Victorian Painting* exemplify newer methodological approaches in Victorian art, a blend of the intertextual and historical, and each superbly succeeds in diverse ways. Edwards's book challenges preexisting assumptions that Aestheticism did not embrace the realm of sculpture and reinscribes the question dramatically. Past scholars have focused on poetry and novels, popular culture, paintings, decorative objects, and even architecture, but not how sculpture also contributed to the phenomenon of art for art's sake and the cult of the homoerotic dandy. As much as *Alfred Gilbert's Aestheticism* achieves in remedying this situation, it also demonstrates how—using a variety of investigative techniques—to explore the overlapping circles of acquaintance and influence among Victorian male artists, along with the impact of those friendships, whether homosexual or heterosexual.

From its initial paragraphs' dazzling reading of homosexual subtexts in the coded language of a letter from Gilbert to Whistler, to the solid historical review of the literature on Aestheticism, the introduction presents an intellectually rigorous foundation and provides a glimpse into how different and revealing Edwards's approach will be. Throughout the text, issues of homoeroticism, effeminacy, and key events such as the alleged homosexual panic toward the end of the century remain constant factors, as does Edwards's discussion of how Gilbert constructed and recalibrated his artistic identity based on the various and shifting models of Whistler, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and George F. Watts, among others.

Focusing on Gilbert's sculpture *Perseus Arming* (1882, Leeds Museums and Galleries), the second chapter revolves around its affected pose, which deliberately aligned itself with artists and dandies in the coterie of Whistler, Oscar Wilde, and other fashionable members of the clique that gathered to see and be seen with art at the Grosvenor Gallery in the 1880s. Visual comparisons of *Perseus Arming* with Frederic Leighton's works and above all with Donatello's *David* (ca. 1430s, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence) are particularly compelling. The intricacies of when Gilbert was in London might have proven tedious, but here are decidedly not, peppered as they are with delectable details on dinners, visits to the theater, gallery life, and other events that conclusively prove how small the Aesthetic fraternity was in many ways. Gilbert's link with J. Edgar Boehm yields fresh insights, and other new points illuminate other topics; for example, Edwards mentions that Rossetti's placement of his poems in his wife Elizabeth Siddal's coffin inspired the Gilbert family to insert the sculptor's letters and photograph in the coffin of a cousin to whom he was unofficially betrothed. Edwards also speculates that Whistler replaced Rossetti as heir to the Aesthetic crown, a risky example for Gilbert to follow given the controversy that raged around Whistler in the 1878 libel trial, as well as around his alleged narcissism, exhibitionism, and unhealthy effeminacy of both personal manner and subject matter.

Centering on Gilbert's *Icarus* (1884, National Museums and Galleries of Wales, Cardiff), the following chapter examines how this sculpture, an adornment for Leighton's house, fit into the most celebrated Aesthetic environment of its day. Overall, the decor of Leighton House conveyed messages about its owner's homoerotic tendencies as well as his affinities with Walter Pater and Algernon Swinburne, both of whom were viewed by contemporaries as marked by homosexual proclivities. The author's linkage of *Icarus* with Leighton's own works is persuasive, as is his analysis that William Powell Frith's *A Private View at the Royal Academy* (1883, Pope Family Trust) foregrounds ways in which a queer brand of Aestheticism invaded even that august atmosphere. Especially astute is Edwards's discussion of the details of how Wilde and other Aesthetes in this composition are dressed, and how Leighton's pose and attire ironically conform with this crowd. It might have been useful to include a cartoon by George DuMaurier lampooning Aesthete gallery-goers as androgynous, thin, and intense, but this is a minor omission.

Gilbert's most renowned work, *Eros* (one of various names given to the Shaftsbury Memorial, 1886–93), perched atop the fountain in London's Piccadilly Circle, is the topic of chapter 4. Edwards challenges official Victorian accounts of the statue's evolution and outlines three significant hurdles Gilbert faced: the constraints imposed by the committee that commissioned the

work, the artist's intentions, and Gilbert's later, often contradictory recasting of the monument and its realization. Among salient events that Edwards marshals are the raising of the age of consent in 1885, the fact that the Piccadilly site was a well-known magnet for male prostitutes, and the significance of the Cleveland Street scandal involving aristocrats and so-called "rent boy" prostitutes. All these elements coalesced in the public imagination of this space and fueled speculation concerning the allegedly indecent and effete Eros figure that delicately hovered above the scene and directed his arrow at passers-by. In addition, parallels with the iconography of St. Sebastian are sound, as are those Edwards draws between Wilde and Gilbert, suggesting that the latter created Eros with Wilde and his set in mind, especially since Wilde had replaced Rossetti as the reigning Aesthetic luminary.

Analyzing the statuettes *Comedy* and *Tragedy* (1890–92, formerly in the collection of Leeds Museums and Galleries), chapter 5 is less sensational than the preceding one, but nonetheless invigorating. Edwards links these sculptures to W. S. Gilbert's 1884 play *Comedy and Tragedy*, which the sculptor repeatedly attended. The author also chronicles the sculptor's disingenuousness about the retrospective meanings he conferred on these two works. Among the unexpected details regarding Gilbert's circle of friendship that emerge in Edwards's research are those concerning Gilbert's relationship with the actor-manager Henry Irving and also his friendship with Bram Stoker, Irving's business manager and the creator of *Dracula*. Once again, the visual parallels between the key works are strong, in this case forged with Leighton's *Needless Alarms* (1886, Victoria and Albert Museum), Simeon Solomon's *Love in Autumn* (1866, private collection), with its similar subject of a boy stung by pain, and Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Garrick Between Tragedy and Comedy* (1761, Rothschild Collection, Waddesdon Manor). Other points about how *Comedy* and *Tragedy* relate to classicizing ephebes and masks ring true, especially the latter's connotations of artifice and secrecy.

Chapter 6, on the *Clarence Memorial Tomb* (1892–1901, Royal Collection, Albert Memorial Chapel, Windsor), commissioned by the royal family, begins by describing the death of one of Queen Victoria's grandsons, the Duke of Clarence, a dandy who is thought by many to have been homosexual. Edwards alludes again to the Cleveland Street scandal and the prince's rumored visits to the brothel there and also to how Gilbert in this instance created another smokescreen of meanings in an attempt to distract viewers from the tomb's homoerotic references. Edwards underscores that Gilbert boldly put forward this image, which is replete with allusions to queer Aestheticism, despite the passage in 1885 of the Labouchere Amendment with its criminalization of homosexual acts and the disastrous outcome of Wilde's trial on charges of gross indecency for committing homosexual acts in 1895. The author perspicaciously discusses such minutiae as how the cut of the coat and the green hue in this sculpture are linked with homosexuality, and he is especially effective in connecting this sculpture with Burne-Jones's *Briar Rose* mural series (1874–90, Faringdon Collection, Buscot Park, Oxfordshire). One might quibble with whether the extraordinary crown in the *Clarence Memorial Tomb* actually resembles that borne by the king in Burne-Jones's *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid* (1880–84, Tate Britain), but the other comparisons are convincing. For example, Edwards reveals how the tomb's *St. George* statuette portrays a young Burne-Jones, and how that artist's work is again evoked in *St. Michael*, which seems to be inspired by paintings such as *The Rock of Doom* and *The Doom Fulfilled* (both 1884–85, Staatgalerie, Stuttgart). The tomb's *The Virgin*, while well-aligned with Burne-Jones's *Sleeping Beauty* (1874–90, Faringdon Collection, Buscot Park, Oxfordshire) and with Whistler's *Rose and Silver* (1864, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC), might also have been compared in its blossom-fixated environment with the (horizontal) transfixed female in John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* (1851–52, Tate Britain).

In the final chapter, Edwards traces Gilbert's distancing of himself from queer Aestheticism and effeminate art and allusions, due partly to his financial and social circumstances. As a result, Watts replaced Pater, Rossetti, Whistler, and Wilde as the sculptor's model. Having idolized Watts at the beginning of his career, Gilbert reconnected with him around 1900. At this point, Watts was a noncontroversial choice as mentor, and Edwards examines Gilbert's endowment of the image of *Edward, King and Martyr* on the Clarence Memorial Tomb with Watts's face. In the wake of the previous strong comparative discussions, the two Pre-Raphaelite ones seem a bit sparse. Edwards might have strengthened his case by comparing Gilbert's *Broken Shrine* (ca. 1900, current location unknown) sculpture with Watts's early painting *The Irish Famine* (1850, Watts Gallery).

Ultimately, *Alfred Gilbert's Aestheticism* is an impressive and densely rich book (including the bibliography) in which Edwards charts the changing character and public reception of the Aesthetic Movement. He does so by examining specific works of art, but also through various personalities of the era, from Pater through Watts. Edwards's attention to detail is astounding, as are his multivalent and masterful close readings of text, history, correspondence, social encodings of

behavior and place, and scores of other hidden cues, all of which have been carefully and sensitively retrieved and re-presented. While the author invokes and intersperses the scholarship of others, especially recent writing by Richard Dorment, Elizabeth Prettejohn, and Michael Hatt, there is no doubt whatsoever that Edwards himself has created a highly original publication.<sup>1</sup> It would have been desirable to have a larger page-size format, typeface, and color illustrations—not just black-and-white ones—but these are insignificant distractions.

Another stellar publication that explores new terrain is *Art for Art's Sake: Aestheticism in Victorian Painting* by Prettejohn, a powerhouse of scholarship who in the last decade has written many compelling books that make significant contributions to the field of Victorian art. *Art for Art's Sake* not only qualifies as a major contender in its own right, but also makes an excellent pendant for Edwards's book, with the latter serving as a kind of sequel to the intellectual territory that Prettejohn covers. Both authors apply intertextual approaches very effectively and treat some overlapping material, and Edwards mentions<sup>2</sup> in his own book Prettejohn's example as a source of inspiration.

Prettejohn begins by examining the vagueness of the term "art for art's sake" and aims to reconfigure the debate on its evolution beyond Britain, linking the motto with Continental affiliations and sources beyond the usual French ones. As a result, unlike previous scholars, she invokes German philosophers such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Immanuel Kant rather than French or British ones (aside from Pater). She rightly declares that Aestheticism did not involve a cohesive and readily "branded" group like the Pre-Raphaelites, but instead argues that all the artists were plagued by the same vexing dilemma of solving the tautological problematics presented by the phrase "art for art's sake." What ensues in her nine chapters is an engrossing inquiry into how Millais, Rossetti, Moore, Burne-Jones, Whistler, and Leighton interpreted Aesthetic issues.

The initial chapter deploys Millais's *Autumn Leaves* (1855–56, Manchester City Art Galleries) and Rossetti's *Blue Closet* (1856–57, Tate Britain) as fitting bases for heuristic analysis, and offers many nuanced deliberations, including how both canvases' conceptual frameworks incorporate doubling. She also considers femininity and particularly the feminized male figure in Aesthetic writing and art, which serves as a tacit dialogue with the direction Edwards pursues in his book. In this initial chapter, Prettejohn strives to outline ideas clearly and explain both methodology and patterns of indebtedness to other fields such as philosophy. But there are nonetheless times in this section—and in subsequent ones—when she perhaps lectures too much and for too long, e.g., on Kant, "free beauty," and other ideas. This might prove necessary in a classroom of undergraduates, but at times it feels somewhat tedious to be repeatedly told how and why to view ideas, events, or objects.

The next chapter focuses on Swinburne, and raises many revitalizing concepts, from the influence of Théophile Gautier and Rossetti to a clever badinage between Swinburne and Charles Baudelaire. Although he often castigated the art critic as a censor of free expression, Swinburne himself nonetheless often played this role and made pronouncements on the art of his friends and others. His comments on Rossetti's embowered stunners such as *Lady Lilith* (ca. 1866–68 and reworked 1872–3, Delaware Art Museum) are adroitly contrasted with William Holman Hunt's disgust with such overt sexuality. Prettejohn's assessments of Watts's *Wife of Pygmalion* (1868, Faringdon Collection Trust, Buscot Park, Oxfordshire), Moore's *Azaleas* (1868, Dublin City Gallery), Frederick Sandys's *Medea* (1866–68, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery), and Whistler's *Six Projects* (ca. 1868, Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC) are all skillfully interwoven into her discussion linking Aestheticism with abstraction and the notion of incompleteness.

Simeon Solomon is the subject of chapter 3. Here Prettejohn notes how his constructions of androgynous figures and homoeroticism were evident as early as the 1860s, years before Gilbert would reinvent these concepts. The softened masculinity projected by Solomon's protagonists stands in opposition to the aggressive stereotyping more typical in Victorian art, and some contemporary critics disliked the indeterminate gender, passivity, and feminine lassitude (barbs later directed at Burne-Jones as well) conveyed by certain of Solomon's images. In effect, a number of Solomon's depictions of men seem equivalent to Rossetti's soulful women, and Prettejohn's comparison of particular works with the mood of absorption predominant in Leighton's *Golden Hours* (1864, private collection) is astute. Also perceptive is her examination of how recurrent objects in Solomon's canvases—e.g., a lamp, myrtle branches, a burning bush, and a rod—all generated both religious and erotic overtones that communicated covert homosexual messages to the cognoscenti. The source-hunting for Solomon's version of Bacchus produces admirable results in portrayals of kindred beautiful boys in works by Leonardo and Michelangelo, as well as Il Sodoma.

Albert Moore dominates chapter 4, and although Prettejohn writes with considerable rhetorical flair, the discussion on form and content and on the painting of flesh in service to “pure Art” devoted exclusively to beauty may strike some as a bit ponderous and overly extended. However, the in-depth analysis of Moore’s *The Musicians* (ca. 1867, Yale Center for British Art), contextualized with Whistler’s *Symphony in White No. II* (1865–67, Barber Institute of Fine Art, University of Birmingham) and Leighton’s *Spanish Dancing Girls* (1867, current location unknown), is dazzling and illuminates shared preoccupations with visual rhythms and music making. Similarly, Prettejohn’s discussion of the way in which these three artists depicted the nude female body, especially that of Venus, is also revealing. In terms of technique, the contrasting of Moore’s thin application of veils of color with Leighton’s luscious, sensuous application of paint advances another valid idea. Modernists will appreciate the comments on how Moore’s *A Quartet: A Painter’s Tribute to the Art of Music, A.D. 1868* (1868, private collection) anticipates in its grid-like arrangement and binary balances the art of Paul Cézanne, Cubism, and Piet Mondrian.

Leighton, who was probably well aware of Hegel’s writings from his years of study in Frankfurt, takes center stage in chapter 5, and Prettejohn points out numerous parallels between the academic and the aesthetic drawn from a Hegelian dialectic. This has the effect of rendering Leighton, who in the past has more often been characterized as an academic painter, a more aptly called Aesthetic one. Like Edwards, Prettejohn acknowledges the overwhelming Aestheticism of Leighton House, but she also synthetically reflects on newly rediscovered works such as Leighton’s sketch for *The Triumph of Music* (ca. 1855–56, Leighton House Museum and Art Gallery) and his amazing surviving color sketch for *Helios and Rhodos* (ca. 1868, private collection). Novel and persuasive visual analogies are a specialty of Prettejohn’s, and she does not disappoint in situating Leighton’s *Helen of Troy* (1865, private collection) and *Summer Moon* (ca. 1872, private collection) with Michelangelo’s Sistine ceiling figures and with Gustave Klimt’s *Danae* (ca. 1907–08, private collection); by contrast, the invoking of Robert Mapplethorpe’s gelatin-silver photograph entitled *Thomas* (1987, Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation) does not function as effectively in this context.

As in Edwards’s book, Whistler exerts an important presence, and *The White Girl* (1862, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC) is compared to resonant effect with Bartolome Murillo’s *Immaculate Conception of the Escorial* (ca. 1868, Museo del Prado) and Jean-Antoine Watteau’s *Pierrot* (ca. 1718–19, Musée du Louvre) in posture and expression, as well as to a poem by Gautier. Whistler’s writings are adroitly diagnosed, especially his importuning of spectators to look at but not interpret his works, to appreciate the paint surfaces and antiphonal relationships. Prettejohn cautions that Whistler’s theories relate only to his own oeuvre and not to all of Aestheticism, and that they developed years after his exposure to writings by Baudelaire, Gautier, and Swinburne. She adds some provocative insights concerning Whistler’s nocturnes as allusions to representation and affirmations of his preference for invoking the reduced visibility of night in subtle and monochromatic hues, economically rendered forms, and blurred distillations of place. She makes original points about how Whistler’s works do not exemplify synesthesia, about the reticence and even femininity of his art form, about the viewing distance he recommended for his nocturnes, and how the latter in their shifting titles are not really a series. The author also deftly analyzes the cleverness of Whistler’s replies during the infamous libel trial of 1878.

Rossetti prevails in the following chapter, which arguably might have been better placed much earlier in the book, but it does pose worthwhile questions related to the difficulties of linking specific paintings with biographical information about Rossetti as well as his poems. Rossetti scholars may disagree with the assertion that paintings like *The Blue Bower* (1865, Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham) truly obliterate the I-thou relationship and ask the viewer to look rather than judge the smoldering female sitters; similarly, the claim that such works qualify as representations of Rossetti’s alter ego may not ring true for some readers. Nonetheless, in addition to chronicling the impact of Robert Buchanan’s attack on Rossetti’s poems as “fleshly,” Prettejohn again proffers excellent comparisons between various images of the masculinized visage of Jane Burden Morris with works by Michelangelo and Botticelli.

The penultimate section on Burne-Jones is not the book’s strongest suit and seems too brief, beginning with the rather narrow claim that modern audiences supposedly only appreciate this artist for his fairytale escapism. As in Edwards’s book, the major impact of the Grosvenor Gallery in shaping the course of Burne-Jones’s career and of avant-garde Aestheticism itself is reaffirmed. Prettejohn also intelligently expounds upon the non-traditional spaces and androgynous faces in works like Burne-Jones’s *Wheel of Fortune* (1875–83, Musée d’Orsay), *The Mill* (1870–82, Victoria and Albert Museum), and *The Days of Creation* (1872–76, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums); in turn, *The Golden Stairs* (1876–80, Tate) and its ceremonial, serpentine flow of androgynous attendants is ingeniously compared with the decorative art of stained glass and

wallpaper. Prettejohn also reflects upon how *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid* can be read as an allegory of William Morris's attraction to socialism. This suggestion revitalizes the canvas and adds to earlier scholarly interpretations by forging stronger links with Morris's writings that convincingly connect with this depiction of a humble, impoverished maiden literally enthroned above the king and placed on a higher level than that of material riches and noble rank.

Pater provides the focus for the final chapter, with Prettejohn citing many intertextualities between his essays and the art of the period. She slowly but thoroughly charts his career, partly to dispute claims that he was disinterested in contemporary art. Demonstrating quite the opposite, she moreover elucidates how Pater's landmark book of 1873, *The Renaissance*, appeared precisely at a time of cultural turmoil (including the scandal about Rossetti's poems, Solomon's arrest for homosexual acts, and so on). She also reveals how Pater's book ultimately brought the Aesthetic School into disrepute. The comments on J.J. Winckelmann and the development of Greek art may strike some readers as digressions, but not so Pater's "School of Giorgione" essay, which presciently probed ideas allied with Whistler's notion of "incompletion" in his works and its impact on their aesthetic significance.

While *Art for Art's Sake* lacks a proper conclusion, it is nonetheless filled with trenchant new ideas matched by a complex and compelling series of brilliant arguments that trace the estrangement of meaning from beauty and the emergence of Aesthetic painting from the 1860s into the last decades of the nineteenth century and beyond—up to Roger Fry's notion of significant form. A generous number of color plates, some of lesser-known objects, enhances the book's visual quality, and the well-spaced typeface and overall design also add to the aptly aesthetic pleasure of perusing the pages.

[Susan P. Casteras](#)

Professor, School of Art, Division of Art History, University of Washington