

*Sir John Gilbert: Art and Imagination in the Victorian Age* edited by Spike Bucklow and Sally Woodcock. London: Lund Humphries, 2011. 264 pp. + 174 colour plates. ISBN 978-1-84822-079-9

In his memorial sketch of Sir John Gilbert published in the *The Magazine of Art* in 1898, Marion Harry Spielmann confidently, or perhaps defiantly, claimed that “real art rises superior to mode or vogue in taste. It has Time upon its side.” More than a century has passed since Spielmann hinted at the mixed fortunes of Gilbert’s art and reputation: it is now high time for a reassessment. In 2011 the Guildhall Art Gallery mounted an exhibition of Gilbert’s work entitled *Sir John Gilbert: Art and Imagination in the Victorian Age*. It formed part of a series of monographic exhibitions showcasing the work of Victorian artists. William Powell Frith (November 2006 to March 2007) was followed by G.F. Watts (November 2008 to April 2009), and hot on the heels of the Gilbert show came an exhibition dedicated to Atkinson Grimshaw, “painter of moonlight” (September 2011 to January 2012).

Unlike his illustrious contemporaries who have retained a certain Victorian eminence, familiar not only to the subject specialist but also to a wider audience, Sir John Gilbert has been largely forgotten. In his heyday, renowned for graphic work, specifically drawings which graced editions of Shakespeare as well as the pages of contemporary novels and weeklies such as *The Illustrated London News* and *The Graphic*, John Gilbert was a household name. His work could be found in most Victorian drawing rooms and nurseries. Largely self-taught, he acquired an impressive facility in several media, ranging from pen and ink to watercolours and oils, and he was valued for his lightning fast and fluent technique, which enabled him to meet the exacting standards and tight turn-around times set by the pictorial press. His choices in book illustration, which included Shakespeare’s plays, the work of contemporary poets such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and traditional children’s stories, played to popular demand. They reveal him to be a clever businessman and a typical Victorian who exhibited at all the usual London venues. In his large-scale watercolours and oils he also explored popular subjects from English medieval history, literature, and legend.

By the time Gilbert was in his mid-fifties he had scaled the heights of the contemporary art world. In 1871, aged 54, he was offered a knighthood, elected President of the Royal Watercolour Society (a post he was to occupy for the rest of his long life), and made an Associate of the Royal Academy, becoming a full member in 1876. Success stories are rarely this straightforward, and by the mid-1880s, the art of Sir John Gilbert had lost much of its general appeal and commercial caché. In 1885 the artist stopped offering his works for sale as he saw prices dwindle and found it increasingly difficult