

THE CULT OF THE RETURNED APOLLO: WALTER PATER'S
RENAISSANCE AND IMAGINARY PORTRAITS

Walter Pater's peculiar fusion of art, sensuousness, and Greek idealism provided an esthetic-philosophical framework for younger men seeking alternatives to a suffocating Victorian England. When Pater's Studies in the History of the Renaissance were published in 1874, his most flamboyant follower, Oscar Wilde, declared that with the book's appearance the world should have ended: Wilde would then have an eternity for savoring the marvellous "golden book." The Renaissance inspired generations of late Victorian youths, and led them to an art of nerves, a special attenuation of sense and esthetic feeling new in English literature. Central was the image of the androgynous male -- Apollo returned to life to inspire an insipid bourgeois age.

Early in his famous "Preface" to the Renaissance, Pater explained that one of the functions of "the aesthetic critic" is to regard all objects, including both works of art and "the fairer forms of nature and human life," as producible of "pfeasurable sensations, each of a more or less peculiar or unique kind." Once one is struck by the temperament of beautiful personalities or beautiful objects, one defines his pleasure by analyzing the influence conveyed by these phenomena. Each "fair personality," each picture, each landscape, has its virtue, wrote Pater -- or that power generating "special impressions" on the sensitive critic/viewer/perceiver. Pater's critic is utterly catholic; all periods and schools of taste are equal. "Genius," Pater concluded, "is always above its age."

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For Pater the Italian Renaissance was particularly momentous. For the first time in Europe, after the ancient Greeks, cults of the personality flowered -- "the care for physical beauty" and "the worship of the body" broke down limits imposed by the rigorous Christianity of the Middle Ages. Pater saw parallels between fifteenth and sixteenth century Italy and the age of Periclean Athens; both were periods "productive in personalities, many-sided, centralised, complete." The blonde youths of the Renaissance, stunning in bodily beauty, agility, and their power to inspire less-beautiful mortals around them, were kin to the youths of Athens -- rendered, of course, in what remains to us of Greek sculpture (and in Roman copies), and in the descriptions by Plato and the Greek poets.