

EXHIBITING THE LATE-VICTORIANS

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The most significant exhibition of books, paintings, and the decorative arts held in London at the end of the nineteenth century did not take place in a gallery or a museum. It was, nevertheless, a display open to public viewing, and it was even accompanied by a catalogue. On the cover of that printed document, the text read as follows:

Catalogue of the Library of Valuable Books, Pictures, Portraits of Celebrities, Arundel Society Prints, Household Furniture, Carlyle's Writing Table, Chippendale and Italian Chairs, Old Persian Carpets and Rugs, Brass Fenders, Moorish and Oriental Curiosities, Embroideries, Silver and Plated Articles, Old Blue and White China, Moorish Pottery, Handsome Ormolu Clock, and numerous Effects: Which will be Sold by Auction, By Mr. Bullock, on the Premises, on Wednesday, April 24th, 1895, at One O'Clock. (Munby 373)

Unlike other sorts of exhibitions, this one was of short duration, with only two day's viewing (and with one of those at the Lincoln's Inn chambers of the legal firm of Messrs. Clarke & Co.) before the objects in it were dispersed. It was organized hastily and without proper security or thought as to how the enormous crowds it attracted could be controlled, resulting in damage to many items and loss through theft of others. Unlike some auctions of important contemporary artifacts, this one was staged not in an auction house, but in an actual house – No. 16, Tite Street, Chelsea. It was, of course, the sale of everything that had belonged to Oscar and Constance Wilde, minus the few personal items which the latter managed to carry away with her, when fleeing to the protection of a friend.

Less than three weeks earlier, Wilde's libel trial against the Marquess of Queensberry (a public spectacle of a different sort) had begun, then ended abruptly with Wilde withdrawing his suit. Immediately afterward, Wilde was