

REVIEWS

The Victorian Artist: Artists' Lifewritings in Britain, ca. 1870-1910 by Julie F. Codell. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. xiii, 376 pp. + 37 b/w illus. ISBN 0-521-81757-9. \$85.00.

This publication represents over fifteen years of research by a North American pioneer of the critical study of Victorian art and culture. Sections have appeared previously but have been revised for this volume, which contributes substantially to our understanding of the construction of artistic lives in the hagiographic multi-volume tomes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What can we compare these publications to today? John Richardson's multi-volume, highly suggestive, still in progress, biographical and art historical discourse on the life of Picasso? Or, in terms of the nepotistic paeans so typical a century ago, MoMA curator Joachim Pissarro's more art-historical books on his great-grandfather, Camille? But contemporary studies are different – they are more analytical, less driven by triumphalism than by contextualization, canonization, and factuality. The age of anecdote, a trope usefully interrogated in Codell's fifth chapter, has passed.

On one hand, this is lamentable. For anecdote and stories and evocations of a culture already recognized as passing are what enliven even the most art-historically bereft of these memoirs, like John Guille Millais's of his father John Everett Millais, and the most salutatory and nicely produced, like J.W. Mackail's two-volume *Life of William Morris* of 1899, or the most literary and detailed, such as Ford Madox Hueffer's of his grandfather Ford Madox Brown, or the most self-congratulatory, like William Holman Hunt's *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*. The latter remains the most impressive, in terms of its scope, its literary pedigree in loosely drawing on the technique of imagined dialogues and speeches from works such as Thucydides's *The Peloponnesian War*, and its auto-biographical nature, a rarity at such length then, as now, for an artist. But interest in artists in an accessible form has diminished in our culture. It takes a Picasso, a canonical, modernist, protean figure who lived a long colourful life in a most active period of history – born two years before the death of Manet, dead four years before the release of *Star Wars* – to warrant a multi-tome biography that will sell to a broad audience.

From 1870 to 1910, roughly the period Codell covers, the by no means homogenous format of the artist "biography" reached its frenetic zenith. Biographies engaged the public in the form of books, serialized articles in journals, and dictionaries – a comprehensive detailing of modern public lives easily equated with our celebrity-saturated culture. They marked the commercial acceptance of art-making, the success of the profession, and its