

Alfred Gilbert's Aestheticism: Gilbert amongst Whistler, Wilde, Leighton, Pater and Burne-Jones by Jason Edwards. Aldershot, Hants; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006. 292 pp. + 97 b/w illus. ISBN 0-7546-0861-1. \$99.95; £120.00.

Still relatively little known outside of art history, where empirical scholars such as Benedict Read, Richard Dorment and Susan Beattie thoroughly rehabilitated him by the mid-1980s, Alfred Gilbert was an outstanding late-nineteenth-century sculptural innovator who linked the avant garde as conventionally understood throughout most of the twentieth century with British Victorian culture. Gilbert was a master of bronze casting, an impeccable anatomist, displayed a flair for decoration and line, and is accepted as a major pioneer of Art Nouveau. Starting his career as a darling of the establishment, but always a freethinking outsider, Gilbert has not registered widely with subsequent generations due to the spectacular collapse of his career in Edwardian Britain.

Gilbert was a perfectionist, working and reworking items, often destroying a nearly completed work and starting afresh. He was soon plagued by financial troubles as budgets blew out and handover dates became endlessly delayed. Relations with patrons soured and many extraordinary events ensued, unparalleled in annals of either the British art world or British high society at that date. The tabloid press denounced him as a scoundrel in a series of scurrilous articles in 1906 and correspondence by supporters and detractors raged as to the moral value of both artist and artworks. Antisemitism even raised its head when noble, poetic Gilbert was regarded as the victim of “Jewish” culture’s shallow, sordid, modern profit-seeking, which put a price tag on genius. Bernard Shaw, no less, countered that artists were, like all other workmen when under contract, subject to the laws of the market and must offer on-time delivery and goods for value of monies paid. Gilbert was claimed to have embezzled monies forwarded to him for artworks and to have “betrayed” the Royal family. Queen Alexandra remarkably broke down in tears in front of non-royal women over Gilbert’s refusal to complete works. Patrons sent lawyers into Gilbert’s studio to assess his progress on artworks. One angry collector bypassed legal channels and stoned Gilbert’s studio, intentionally breaking his windows until he handed over unfinished maquettes.

Gilbert fell on his sword by resigning from the Royal Academy (of whom he was once the most celebrated protégée) before they were compelled to expel him. Unlike the spectacular *coup de grace* of Wilde’s trial and imprisonment, Gilbert suffered a slow, tortured death over many months, even years, as the strains with the Royal family became apparent in the early months of Edward VII’s reign. Jason Edwards regards Wilde’s and Gilbert’s fates as linked phenomena and direct attacks upon aestheticism. Gilbert escaped to Europe,