

The Cult of Beauty: The Aesthetic Movement 1860-1900 edited by Stephen Calloway and Lynn Federle Orr. London: V & A Publishing, 2011. 288 pp. ISBN 9781851776283. \$65.00.

“The Cult of Beauty: The Victorian Avant-Garde, 1860-1900.” Exhibition, The Legion of Honor, San Francisco (February-June 2012).

The New Painting of the 1860s: Between the Pre-Raphaelites and the Aesthetic Movement by Allen Staley. New Haven: Yale UP, 2011. 400pp. +200 colour plates, 150 b/w illus. ISBN 9780300175677. \$85.00.

British art has become mainstream: recent blockbuster exhibitions in the last few years include “The Pre-Raphaelites,” shows on Millais, Hunt, and Brown, and “The Cult of Beauty” exhibitions in London, Paris, and San Francisco, of which the San Francisco exhibition differed from the other two. We tend to take artists’ Aestheticist discourse on beauty at face value and ignore underlying issues that even the artists recognized were problematic, such as the commodification of beauty. In his 1888 Presidential Address at the Liverpool Art Congress, Frederic Leighton, one of the icons of Aestheticism, argued for a national role for artists blending nationalism (“greatness,” “pride”) and economics (“national prosperity”). Leighton insisted that art should not be divorced from industrial production, and that consumer demand should be shaped and educated by artists (qtd in Emilie Barrington, *Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Baron Leighton* 2:343-44). Thus, artists could contribute to Britain’s prosperity and improve the public’s taste, not their morality.

Leighton, and many other artists and the unabashedly popular and commercial art press, advocated artists’ participation in economics as a sign of professionalism that distinguished artists from amateurs and from artisans. Jonathan Freedman argues that Aestheticism synthesized aesthetics and commodification by positioning artists as professionals through renegotiations between art production, economics, and the social – a process resulting in “the commodification of ‘culture’ itself.” High culture was deemed accessible through taste, education, or the acquisition of goods. Ironically, some of these goods “turned out to be artifacts that critiqued commodity culture itself.” Bearing a “monopoly of knowledge,” the artist appeared disinterested, while staging a successfully choreographed career (Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* xii-xiii; xix).

The exhibition was stunning with its roughly 180 pieces and years of preparation. Principles of design articulated by Owen Jones and Christopher Dresser, as well as furniture, were thoroughly integrated with paintings to underscore common formal patterns. Rooms were organized by such topics