

The Holland Park Circle: Artists and Victorian Society by Caroline Dakers. New Haven: Yale UP, 1999. vii, 303 pp. + 35 colour plates, 100 b/w illus. ISBN 0-300-08164-2. \$45.00.

Today context is everything, and this book is a fine contextual study of some of the best known artists of the late Victorian era. Caroline Dakers demonstrates the influence of one small artists' community in Holland Park on the formation of late Victorian architecture, art, and design. Its simple geographical framework throws new light on the art of Edward Burne-Jones, G.F. Watts, Frederic Leighton, J.A.M. Whistler, and Philip Webb, among a host of others. It lays bare many of the economic and geographical forces that brought high Victorian art into being. It is a study of Victorian class structure and wealth that offers a splendidly researched account of the physical creation of the late Victorian art world.

One might expect that Dakers's approach, so grounded in class, price, and place, would be the foundation for a Marxist-leaning treatise, an exposé of capitalist decadence, or at the very least an analysis of gendered stratification in the late Victorian economy. Nothing could be further from the truth. Her approach is richly detailed and profoundly sympathetic, as she attempts to define what is remarkable in late Victorian art. This is a study in patronage, in influence by propinquity, and in the economics of high art in a community that worked hard to earn its name and its artistic incomes. Above all, Dakers's approach is architectural, focusing in particular on the houses in Holland Park designed by Philip Webb. She pays attention to the obvious. She reminds us, with no browbeating along the way, that paintings always exist on a wall of a specific building, in a specific place, produced by a very specific physical and cultural context. She helps us to understand that the place for studying Victorian art is not today's Tate Britain or the Yale Center for British Art, but rather Leighton House, the Linley Sambourne House, Whistler's Peacock Room, and those few locations where physical context allows art to speak in its original tongue. Where physical context is lost, Dakers reconstructs it from extensive research. To present that physical context, she offers never before seen paintings from private collections, never before published manuscripts, and never before published architectural views. She lays out her findings with constant reference to physical mapping. The result is a wealth of new information for seasoned Victorian scholars, and a wonderfully entertaining read for the novice.

Dakers's writing style is remarkably Edwardian. With wit and a keen sense of a good story line, she introduces us to the heroes and comedians of her story and sells their moment in history to the reader. The result is a grand collection of society pages set in an historical structure of birth, maturity, and decay.