

*Peacock and Vine: Fortuny and Morris in Life and at Work* by A.S. Byatt. London: Chatto & Windus, 2016. 192 pp. + 46 illus. ISBN 9781784740801. £14.99; \$26.95.

In December 2014, the avant-garde artist Jeremy Deller broke new ground – and created massive controversy in the British press – when he curated for Modern Art Oxford an exhibition titled *Love Is Enough: William Morris and Andy Warhol*. The exhibition later moved to the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (25 April – 6 September 2015) and proved in equal measure both provocative and popular there. Many viewers reacted with puzzlement, failing to see what a committed Victorian socialist poet and idealist, dedicated to reviving handicrafts and to preserving the English pastoral world, had to do with an apolitical promoter of modern celebrity, of anything-goes American urban nightlife culture, of art as commodity and vice versa, and of mass reproduction. It was an intellectually challenging pairing, to say the least, but it brought hordes of spectators into the two galleries, and it exposed to new audiences the work of William Morris, however questionable the context in which this appeared.

In interviews, Jeremy Deller explicitly made himself the linchpin holding together these two disparate artists, asserting that his interest in both of them and their combined influence on him lent coherence to the exhibition. This proved a bold, if somewhat narcissistic, approach, and A.S. Byatt has taken a similar tack in producing *Peacock and Vine: Fortuny and Morris in Life and Work*. The result is a very physically attractive little object, only seven inches high and six inches wide, but one filled with both full-page and two-page-spread photographic illustrations – like a coffee-table book in miniature (or, as I have taken to calling it, an espresso-table book). It is not so much an account of two creative figures as of three, with the novelist Byatt herself often front and centre. She writes throughout in the first-person, refers to her own experience with aging and with travels, and links her family background (“My own ancestors were potters in the English pottery towns”) to her attraction to these very different men who worked in multiple media, but who both favoured the making of beautiful *things*.

Byatt even includes two images of herself, both taken at the Museo Fortuny in Venice. In one, she shares a seat on a bench with a wooden mannequin, where her no-nonsense clothes (unadorned shirt and trousers) contrast with the colourful, elegantly decorative garb of the woman in an unidentified painting (presumably by Fortuny) that hangs on the wall above her. There are no equivalent views of her in any of Morris’s houses, which suggests that her greater immediate interest is in Mariano Fortuny, whom she discovered only late in life and, in fact, through the lens of literature – through her memory of