

Modern Painters, Old Masters: The Art of Imitation from the Pre-Raphaelites to the First World War by Elizabeth Prettejohn. New Haven: Yale UP, for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2017. 288 pp. + 130 colour, 30 b/w illus. ISBN 9780300222753. \$55; £45.

On the surface, Elizabeth Prettejohn's *Modern Painters, Old Masters* poses two preliminary difficulties, the first appearing in its initial statement on art history's neglect, even rejection, of intertextuality as a throwback to the despised era of connoisseurship, followed by a list of fourteen "theoretical issues." Number 8 reads:

Can formal resemblance operate independently of meaning and context? When does formal resemblance have implications for meaning and who is the responsible agent for identifying those implications – the artist who imitated the form, the viewer who made the connection, the society in which the connection was meaningful, the historian who later, and perhaps in the light of subsequent effects, was able to see a relationship?

Number 9 "puts the previous point differently," but in five lines rather than six. By this stage, as no specific examples provide a purchase, general readers are intimidated and deterred, while even postgrad students obliged to invoke critical theory will wonder if they can get through this.

The other issue is the book's challenging title. "Modern Painters" has had a variety of meanings, but for non-specialists it belongs somewhere in the realm of Modernism, or at least twentieth-century art, normally so distinct from Old Masters. By this measure, the late Victorian British painting of the subtitle is hardly modern; indeed it seems to have continued a washed-out tradition of Old Mastery easel-art, devotional and heroic subjects, public portraits and private "courtesan" images, created by a relentless lineage of male geniuses in the wake of Vasari.

These presentational obstacles are a pity, because Prettejohn's book goes on to make a strong case for critical attention to the artworks on which she has based her career, through diligent, thoughtful examination of concept and execution in regard to paintings by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Edward Burne-Jones, J.W. Waterhouse, Frederic Leighton, Walter Sickert, and John Singer Sargent, among others. Formal analysis features strongly, with its implied interest in the pictorial address that an artist employs, albeit to my mind there is less assessment of the technical skill that allowed Millais, Sargent, and others to place figures in visually convincing space but restricted Rossetti, say, to close-ups and stage-set friezes.