
'I have only one subject to lecture on, the relation of Art to Labour,' declared William Morris in October 1883. Much the same might be said of Tim Barringer's sumptuously illustrated *Men at Work*, which is a powerful analysis of a rich variety of mid-nineteenth-century visual images of the labouring male body. Influenced by Marxism ('the erasure of class . . . has gone too far') and working within the tradition of Francis Klingender's *Art and the Industrial Revolution* (1947), Barringer none the less finds Marxist categories and Klingender's celebration of a heroic and unified Victorian proletariat too simplistic to capture the full complexity of the aesthetic images and social groups he discusses. His approach thus has much in common with a Marxist sociology of culture in its intention to 'reject a polarity in which contextual readings and formal analysis are seen as mutually exclusive', but in the end he operates a New Historicist procedure of 'thick description' as he returns artefacts to the complex historical discourses and practices of their moment of production rather than a Marxist model of 'reflection' or 'mediation' in which artworks are determined by other, more fundamental levels of social reality. Moreover, in addition to class, Barringer wants to set the concepts of masculinity, Empire, religion and region at the heart of his cultural analysis.

The result is a fine study which starts its chapters with memorable iconic images – Ford Madox Brown's *Work* (1852–65), George Vicat Cole's *Harvest Time* (1860), James Sharples's *The Forge* (1859) – and then moves out from them into the dense mesh of contemporary discourses and practices that they engage and transform in their own artistic labour. The reading of Brown's great image is something of a methodological tour de force, constantly making illuminating linkages between the painting and wider societal images and investigations of labour. The genre of history painting, Christian Socialist views of Christ's body, Brown's own five-page 1865 essay on *Work*, Mayhew's social explorations, Thomas Edward Plint, the Leeds evangelical
stockbroker who was the painting’s original purchaser, anxieties over the masculinity (or lack of it) of intellectual labour: all open further dimensions of meaning in Brown’s busy and unforgettable image.

Barringer’s chapter around Vicat Cole’s *Harvest Time – Painted on Holmbury Hill* takes us into the world of rural rather than urban labour. Cole's picture is a step beyond Ruskinian landscape painting, which privileges the artist’s response to nature over the representation of work in the countryside, yet it celebrates traditional forms of agricultural labour which, as Barringer demonstrates, were increasingly discrepant with the industrialised ‘high farming’ or ‘second agricultural revolution’ that was transforming the English countryside (indeed, one of the ironical undercurrents of *Men at Work* is that art seems capable of articulating particular modes of labour only at the moment of their historical supersession). Only in such ‘backward’ counties as Surrey did traditional rural work still survive, though the enterprising middle-class artist could always buy himself an estate to ensure that they lived on just a little bit longer; Barringer traces through the intriguing case of John Linnell who himself did exactly this in July 1851.

If James Sharples’s *The Forge* takes us into the very heart of industrial labour, contrasting favourably in its precision and detail with a more external ‘theatrical imagery of the industrial sublime’, it too is subject to a law of aesthetic irony, offering ‘a utopian fantasy of craft autonomy at precisely the historical moment when the last vestiges of that autonomy were being demolished’. Sharples himself, industrial blacksmith by day and self-taught artist by night, is a liminal figure who puts many binary Victorian aesthetic concepts into crisis; and with this meditation on a life as well as an artefact Barringer’s book opens towards the broader themes of its closing chapters.

The career of Godfrey Sykes, painter and designer, links the worlds of Sheffield manufacturing and South Kensington art instruction and museums, and broaches more general questions which have, naturally, been implicit in Barringer’s account throughout: what kind of art and art education is appropriate to the labouring classes; how much art can industrial products
embody; what kind of labour is the practice of art itself? Central to Victorian meditations on such issues is John Ruskin, whose own transformative museum and land settlement schemes for Sheffield feature here too.

Ruskin’s thought opens out into what Barringer intriguingly terms ‘Colonial Gothic’. Both the Indian displays and Pugin’s Medieval Court at the Great Exhibition of 1851 were implicit critiques of the industrial modernity centrally celebrated there; and Men at Work demonstrates persuasively how a discourse of Indian crafts and traditional village life intersects with the more familiar Romantic anti-capitalist Gothic of Carlyle and Ruskin. From this fruitful cross-breeding of ideas and values there emerges, in one direction, aspects of Morris’s artistic practice – for in Barringer’s view, Morris’s ‘textile designs form the aesthetic culmination of Colonial Gothic’ – and, in another direction, Mahatma Gandhi’s anti-imperialist politics of swaraj (self-rule) and swadeshi (home industry).

Barringer closes his book with a brief glimpse at the Ruskin-Whistler trial of 1878 which for him is the moment when tense but productive mid-Victorian interactions between art and labour break decisively apart; for Aestheticism not only turns against the representation of active labouring bodies but also seeks to banish all traces of labour from the actual making of the artefact itself. We don’t necessarily have to accept this rather arbitrary closing point. Morris himself, after all, was about to embark on a major new venture in his thinking about art and labour from 1883 onwards when, as a socialist, he tries to fuse the Marxist and Ruskinian critiques of industrial modernity which in Barringer’s account appear merely as non-communicating opposites. And we certainly don’t have to accept the quality of proof-reading that this book displays, for it is marred by an inordinate number of minor errors. But these cavils aside, Barringer has given us a formidable book on the Victorian visual culture of labour, one that we shall be returning to and no doubt critically building on for decades to come.

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