
For his part, Morris believed that beauty and function, through the hands of a good craftsman, entered into an eloquent and sensuous sort of dance, in which the viewer, the user and the collector overlap in as much as they easily neglect to differentiate where the desire for beauty ends and where the appreciation for technical skill begins. (p. 6)

This beautifully written sentence belies the bulk of the introduction to *Material Cultures, 1740–1920*, which runs to nearly seventeen pages and is a tough read for anyone not of a philosophical bent. Potvin and Myzelev seem determined to out-Baudrillard Baudrillard, or out-Benjamin Benjamin, Stewart, Pearce or Kant in this section, as if thesis-speak is necessary for peer validation; it probably is. Part of the aim of this book is to extend theoretical boundaries, and so a display of theoretical virtuosity and obfuscatory language is inevitable. Try this typical sentence:

The fourth line of investigation … is an intervention moving beyond the disciplinary ethos of material culture to argue more Firmly for the aesthetic, visual and semiotic potency inseparable from any understanding of material objects integral to the lives of their collecting subjects without falling into a traditional, isolating and aggrandising connoisseurial elitism, which reifies the Kantian object/subject divide in its avocation of aesthetic disinterest. (p. 9)

Had I not been reading for Morris, I would have flung the publication from the Tarpeian rock on reaching page seventeen. This would have been a shame, as the essays which follow the introduction, by eleven different scholars, including Potvin and Myzelev, are informative, amusing, and by and large not over-weighted with philosophical deconstruction. This collection studies collectors and their collections of craft, design and fashion, providing them with historical context and meaning.

In 1785 Karl Philipp Moritz wrote, ‘it follows that an object cannot be beautiful purely because it gives us pleasure, for otherwise everything that is useful would also be beautiful. The thing that gives us pleasure without being of any real use to us is what we call beautiful’. (p. 5) Not mentioned in this book, despite his mastery of glorious ornament, which, through modernism’s lens would be labelled an ‘excess’, the book collector William Morris said something slightly different, and rather modernist, on 19 February 1880, in his lecture ‘Labour and Pleasure versus Labour and Sorrow’ at the Birmingham School of Design:

Believe me, if we want art to begin at home, as it must, we must clear our houses of troublesome superfluities that are for ever in our way, conventional comforts
that are no real comforts, and do but make work for servants and doctors. If you want a golden rule that will fit everybody, this is it: have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful.

Stacey Sloboda’s essay ‘Porcelain bodies: gender, acquisitiveness, and taste in eighteenth-century England’ describes how Adam Smith had tried to unite beauty and utility through the notion of ‘fitness’ in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). ‘He argued that the more perfectly an object is suited to its use, the more beautiful it becomes’. This seems to lead directly to Morris.

A gender divide has traditionally equated women with consumption but men with collection, but Sloboda deconstructs the ‘mythomorphic’ figure of the female china collector. She describes the acquisition and display of china collections and china’s correlation in literature with the fragility of female virtue, intellect, and the delicate feminine body. Clive Edwards’s essay describes craft collections made for the home by women between 1750 and 1900. Gendering, partly influenced by determinist philosophies and ‘promoted both in schools and in print, meant that by the mid-eighteenth century, any visual awareness which women had developed was particularly directed towards their homes’. (p. 37) During the nineteenth century, homemade collections of shell work, spill work or lace, joined others in the home: books, art, ‘cult of death’ ephemera, taxidermy, and so on. (p. 38) The making and collection of objects was literally a labour of love, filling up time and providing comfort and a creative outlet, but they also filled up the interior alarmingly, which has been equated with mania or what philosopher Max Nordau described as ‘an irresistible desire among degenerates to accumulate useless trifles’. (p. 44)

In her essay ‘Spatializing the private collection: John Fiott Lee and Hartwell House’, Anastasia Filippoupoliti describes the collections of Lee (1783–1866), his observatory, and his eclectic displays of scientific and antiquarian artefacts at Hartwell House which was open to the public by arrangement. Lee was a patron and member of numerous learned societies. The collection, of 4,650 artefacts on his death, reflected well upon his standing both through its public display and through his largesse in donations to institutions such as the British Museum and the Society of Antiquaries. Lee’s taxonomy was influenced by international exhibitions so that groups of objects were exhibited in series, rather than individually, and he used the classification systems of public institutions.

Nadine Rottau discusses the aftermath of the Great Exhibition of 1851 in her essay, ‘Everyone to his taste’, or “truth to material”?: the role of materials in collections of applied arts’. New materials such as hard rubber and xylonite defied the accepted definition of ‘truth to materials’ because they were able to imitate the qualities of others such as ivory, bronze or marble. They were thus rejected by
gurus of good taste and condemned as ‘moral delinquencies’. (p. 83) The displays of the ‘Chamber of Horrors’ at the Museum of Ornamental Art in London made connections between materials, bad taste and morality in its collected displays.

Several essays study issues of ‘colonial and capitalist strategy’, or Orientalism, in the process of collecting artefacts from other, exotic, cultures. Artist John Frederick Lewis (1805–76) made a large collection of Middle Eastern women’s costume while living in Egypt. On his return to England, he employed his collection in order ‘to fetishize’ harem women’s clothing, and made a series – a collection – of paintings which used the harem as its subject. (p. 102) He dressed his models with the rich fabrics and clothing from his own collection, with an excess of colour, sumptuous pattern and weave. His clothing collection ‘functioned to reiterate racial and gendered difference, keeping at bay any similarities between the Western viewer and the Easterner’. (p. 105) The harem is itself a collection of course, and Joan DelPlato’s essay provides an interesting critique of Lewis’s pictures and the collectors who purchased them. John James Ruskin owned two. Whilst the paintings reference the Orient and the real harem, they are in fact simulacra. Lewis’s young wife Marion was his most frequent model.

Anne Anderson’s essay ‘“Chinamania”: collecting Old Blue for the House Beautiful, c. 1860–1900’ is a delightful account of the influence of the mania for Old Blue china upon James McNeill Whistler, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetic Movement. Old Blue provided its owner with ‘otherness’ and exoticism. However, Anderson argues that china collection also signalled the feminine and the effeminate and brought accusations of decadence, perversity and sexual ‘inversion’.

The heightened emotionalism of the aesthete connotes an erosion of masculinity, while the transference of affections to objects and an insatiable appetite may be read as a subversion of sexual desire. As a ‘rule-governed passion’ collecting can be likened to a degenerate mental condition with the potential to undermine gender relations and negate sexual differentiation … was Blue itself a sign of ‘negative characteristics’? (p. 111)

Old examples of Blue could be purchased from Marks on Oxford Street or Joel Joseph Duveen, as well as junk and bric-à-brac shops. Marks’s business card was said to be a collaboration between Whistler, who supplied the pictured ‘Hawthorn’ jar and peacock feather, Rossetti who designed the Japanese background, and Morris, who designed the typography. (p. 124) Rossetti purchased two “sumptuous” Hawthorn jars with covers from Marks for £120 in 1867. (p. 117) However, he was forced to sell them back, at a loss, following his breakdown in 1872. They were bought by William Armstrong, and one is included in his portrait hanging in the dining room at Cragside. Rossetti and Whistler often included Old Blue in their paintings and the intense rivalry between them sparked full-blown Chinamania.
When Whistler bragged about his own pots, Rossetti evidently retorted, ‘My
dear Jimmy, if I take to it, I will beat your collection in a week’. This he did by
purchasing for £200 an entire collection of blue and white from the Marquis
d’Azeglio, the retiring Sardinian ambassador: ‘since I lately bought all in a bunch
this gorgeous collection, I pant and gasp for more.’ (p. 120)

In ‘From specimen to scrap: Japanese textiles in the British Victorian interior,
1875–1900’, Elizabeth Kramer discusses collections of decorative Japanese art in
Britain following the London International Exhibition of 1862, when Japanese
objects were displayed for the first time since the reopening of Japan to the West
in 1854. She challenges the accepted chronology of the craze for Japanese design,
which placed interest from collectors, artists and critics in the 1860s, the espousal
of Japanese art by the Aesthetic Movement in the 1870s and a full-blown mania
for all things Japanese in the 1880s. The real situation was more complex, with
Japanese textiles and artefacts ‘blurring class distinctions, elite and popular cul-
ture and masculine and feminine spheres and roles in Victorian Britain between
1875 and 1900’. (p. 130) Kramer describes the dictates of domestic advice litera-
ture about the display of exotic collections and the artistic positioning of artefacts
and draperies.

In Beautiful Houses (1882), Mary Eliza Haweis examined the relationship
between collections of exotica and interior display in famous homes. ‘Hints
of Japan’ were ‘detected in the furniture, curtains, and portières’ in the home
of painter George Henry Boughton. His studio was ‘swathed in Oriental rugs,
embroideries, and old tapestries, with Persian and Indian rugs and cushions
adorning settee and floor’. In Alma-Tadema’s studio, ‘an entire wall was covered
in shelves with innumerable “draperies” rolled up – protruding enough to be
distinguished’. (p. 133) Edward Burne-Jones’s studio contained ‘heavily carved
furniture, stained glass, embroideries and tapestries’. Artists carefully arranged
their studio collections to appeal to the sensibilities of prospective customers.
In Hints on Household Taste (1872), Charles Eastlake dictated how to display
collections in a domestic environment, by placing associated groups together so
that ‘a little museum may be formed and remain a source of lasting pleasure to
its possessors, seeing that “a thing of beauty is a joy forever”’. (p. 140) Displays in
department stores and curio shops of middle range ‘oriental’ fabrics and objects
inspired emulation. Middle-class homemakers were ‘encouraged to participate
in collectorly behaviours’. (p. 145)

Judith Codell is scathing about Viceroy George Curzon’s influence upon the
representation of Indian craft during the early twentieth century. Indians had to
be seen to be producing purified, completely Indian craft, whilst the British were
able to produce both high art and crafts. In ‘Indian crafts and imperial policy:
hybridity, purification, and imperial subjectivities’, Codell details the influence
of Curzon’s speech at the opening of the Delhi Coronation Durbar in 1903. By
1851, many Indian objects were already European in form, and Indian art was traditionally hybrid. Indians mimicked European dress and furniture, which threatened the authority of colonial discourse and endorsed hybridity. However, George Birdwood’s influential publications, written between 1878 and 1880, and inspired by the 1877 Coronation Durbar, nurtured the myth of the spirituality of the Indian village craftsman, who ‘polluted no rivers, deformed no pleasing prospects, nor poisoned any air’. (p. 153) Displays from the 1880s on consciously policed Indian goods for signs of Europeanisation, ‘differencing and “othering” Indian things as not European. … Curzon’s purification was as important to fantasies of a pure Britishness as it was to fantasies of restoring Indian traditions.’ (p. 154)

Alla Myzelev describes the formation of the Peasant Arts Society and the Peasant Arts Museum in Haslemere in ‘Collecting peasant Europe: peasant utilitarian objects as museum artefacts’. Owing to Enclosure, Britain had lost her own peasantry, and thus her vernacular traditions, and it was intended that this void be filled through the import and display of foreign peasant objects and the revival of peasant handicrafts. This initiative formed part of an international Romantic Nationalism movement which led to the formation of open air museums of peasant art and architecture, such as Skansen (Stockholm), and art and craft revival groups. The myth of an idealised past and a pure Nordic race was implied. Gerald Davies, one of the leaders of the Haslemere group, acquired only ‘those objects that were to produce pleasure in the making and in the use, but not to produce direct gain of money’. (p.174) Pottery was thus excluded.

In another nod to Romantic Nationalism, ‘Collecting the Sublime and the beautiful; from Romanticism to revolution in Celtic Revival jewellery’, Joseph McBrinn makes a study of Irish jewellery designers, who created and collected objects impregnated with nationalistic messages during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, an era of growing revolutionary horror, and collates the revival in Celtic jewellery with Edmund Burke’s ideas of ‘terror’ and ‘pleasure’. Between 1839 and 1896, a number of precious Celtic artefacts were discovered across Ireland, the Cross of Cong, the Tara Broach and the Ardagh Chalice among them. These were collected and would form the nucleus of a new national collection. Copies of them were copied and sold, together with other derivative Celtic designs. ‘Jewellery became the epitome and embodiment of the sublime in the sense that as an object it came to reflect the ravages of the era as opposed to an abstract ideal of beauty.’ (p. 212) ‘These precious objects betrayed not only the political inclinations of their wearers, but also helped to construct an historical continuum between the medieval mastery of the Celtic craftsmen and a modern nationalistic awareness.’ (p. 12)

Illustrator Charles Ricketts (1866–1931) and artist Charles Shannon (1863–1937) enjoyed a long and devoted domestic relationship which transgressed the gender codes of late Victorian and Edwardian economic and domestic systems.
In ‘Collecting intimacy one object at a time: material culture, perception, and the spaces of aesthetic companionship’, John Potvin shows how what he calls their ‘queer’ collection of beautiful things made it possible for them to re-imagine their home – The Vale, their house in Chelsea – away from the dominant bourgeois definitions of domesticity and masculinity. It became a popular destination for artists and writers.

Oscar Wilde was a close friend and introduced the artist Sir William Rothenstein who was ‘quickly charmed by both the men and “their simple dwelling”’. He recalled the ‘primrose walls, apple-green skirting and shelves, the rooms hung with Shannon’s lithographs, a fan-shaped water-colour by Whistler, and drawings by Hokusai’. (p. 199) Potvin describes the entire home functioning as a sort of ‘phenomenological cabinet of curiosity’ and quotes a delightful description of the now depersonalised collection, displayed in the Fitzwilliam Gallery in Cambridge in 1939, after the death of Ricketts and Shannon. ‘It is like going to a cemetery, gazing at a mummy in a crystal coffin: the presence that once informed it all, the daily life which flowered among these things, the flow of conversation, of laughter, the sense of being in the intimate company of great art collected by a zealot, himself a genius, all that is gone, gone.’ (p. 201) The objects assumed identities all of their own; Shannon once referred to three Sheffield jugs as ‘Bullfinch,’ ‘Swallow’, and ‘Fatty’. (Ibid.)

As Material Cultures, 1740–1920 is written by eleven different authors, there is bound to be slight unevenness in its presentation, but by and large it achieves a unity of approach. There is the odd inaccuracy, however: on p. 153, Julie Codell describes how ‘In a Times letter of 1 May 1879, the who’s who of the arts and crafts movement (such as William Morris and C.R. Ashbee …) praised Birdwood’s condemnation of industrialization and of the government for eviscerating Indian arts’. This does not quite ring true, as Ashbee would only have been sixteen at the time, and I can find no record of the letter in the literature. Alla Myzelev repeatedly uses the term ‘natural history museums’ to describe museums specialising in the collections of art and artefacts, which sounds odd to an English ear. It may have been altered in trans-Atlantic translation.

Diana Andrews


At first sight, the title of this book might lead readers of this journal to expect some considerations of such prominent Victorian visual topics as Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement. However, that is emphatically not the case: the index offers ‘art’ only under ‘art galleries’ and, oddly, ‘art pour art’. Ruskin does make