

A Friend (Re)Visits South Kensington

From a scribbled manuscript (in William Morris's hand?) newly discovered by Jan Marsh

Up at the League, there had been one night another brisk conversational discussion, during which a man whom we know very well had been roaring very loud, as was his wont, about the sham and shoddy wares that pass for use and ornament in this age of ours, damning the present debased system of arts and manufactures, from the silk-curtained drawing rooms of the rich to the useless, dreary parlours of ordinary folk.

Going home by the underground railway, we passed through South Kensington station, where I mused awhile on the great museum above, housing so many wonderful examples of the decorative arts from all ages and places in the world – that museum that seemed to be founded for my especial benefit and pleasure. Once home, I tumbled into bed, falling into sleep that was at first dreamless and then confused.

In my dream, I was entering the great museum, as so often before, but with a fresh purpose – to wit, to review for our *Journal* a new exhibition celebrating our era. Walking through the galleries, I found them strangely altered, although full of familiar friends like the Syon cope, and when I came to the exhibition doors, its title puzzled me (as things often do in dreams). *The Victorian Vision*, I said; well, those are two words I should not have coupled together.

Inside, I was at first dismayed: somehow I had been induced to visit a vulgar show got up to herald the forthcoming jubilee of our beloved Queen, with large and flashy depictions of herself on the throne and en famille. Prominent among these was Landseer's portrait of the royal spouses in fancy dress as King Edward and Queen Philippa – a pair of ridiculous puppets and to my mind a grievous perversion of the medieval spirit. Worse, the first crafted object my gaze lighted upon was a huge silver-gilt epergne designed by the Consort, depicting a variety of dogs and their dead victims – hares, rats and so forth. A more horrible item can scarcely be imagined; or rather, a more horrible waste of high workmanship, for the piece was certainly intricately fashioned.

I was therefore about to turn tail and depart, for my growling was growing audible. But the rooms were not crowded, as I had expected, despite the proliferation of gaudy items and worthless pictures such as Mr Hicks's ill-conceived and poorly-painted wedding party, or Mr Frith's railway station, which nevertheless has some value in showing the sort of society this 'Victorian' age of ours has spawned. Hard by, *The Long Engagement* by my old friend Arthur Hughes, provided a moment's respite and pleasure, with its jewelled colour,

shining detail and sweet sentiment. Well do I recall the impact of the same artist's *April Love*, although, I confess, maturer years have made me impatient with such subjects. The faithful girl is surely a goose to endure one more day of this betrothal: the young New Woman of our own time certainly would not.

Beyond, was a section entitled 'Nature' – mis-titled, it meseemed, for where is 'nature' in a ceramic stool in the shape of a monkey, an armchair made of antlers, a firescreen imprisoning gemlike humming birds between sheets of glass, or – more terrible than all these – twenty drowned kittens stuffed and dressed as a society wedding? Withal, I began to grin, as I saw what the exhibition organisers were about: a satiric display of all that is trivial and tasteless, wasteful of wealth and talent, such as our age excels in. You can imagine I was not pleased, round the next corner, to find a sample of my own Honeysuckle design, hung beside three garish floral prints – until I reflected that this conjunction amply proved my argument.

So in a somewhat unsettled state, I moved through to the next room, where my spirits lifted as I beheld a most beautiful palanquin with ivory filigree, from Madras. How this exquisite Indian craftsmanship contrasted with yet another silver-gilt centrepiece, with horses, dogs, flamingos and Nubian grooms, once more conceived by the late lamented Consort. I laughed aloud, however, at the next object, a wooden portrait of the Empress Brown like a fat sow in a crown, robustly carved by an unknown artist from the Yoruba people. Now I was starting to enjoy my visit.

I will pass over the showcase of jewels as gaudy as any shop window, except to remark on the spoils of conquest there displayed – the fine emeralds captured at Seringapatam and set into a tiara and necklace for any common duchess to sport – and the hideous brooch of turquoise beads studded into a spray of convolulus (according to the label: there was not the least touch of nature). Close by were various gifts presented by Maharajahs to our wastrel Prince of Wales, which I saw years ago, both here in the museum and at the Paris exhibition of 1878: all fine gold and enamel work, though a trifle overwrought. The vulgar styles favoured by our economic system have a deplorable effect on those of what we are pleased to call our 'Empire', as they strive to match the showy effects. A bejewelled inkstand in the form of an oriental gondola was almost as bad as Brummagem ware, albeit relieved by exquisite gilt inlay on the neatly shaped scissors. Either my dream was to blame, or the organisers are fond of a joke, for in this same case stood a small packet of Indian tea – for the sake of which the ancient lands are pillaged by our conquest and commerce.

The case marked 'China' offered a more melancholy sample of pillage, for while the great incense burner and cloisonné enamel ice-chest are fine works, they came to the museum as loot from Pekin's summer palace – as I know so well, my own brother Arthur having participated in this destructive expedition. Another incense burner, from Japan, in the shape of a giant eagle, was purchased by South Kensington for a high price in 1875, as I also recall, in the belief that it was sixteenth-century work. I had my doubts then, and was pleased to see, in my dream, a label describing this ugly item as new when acquired, the result of metalworkers turning from armour to fancy wares to suit foreign traders.

The true design and craft skills of the people were evident in the humbler wares,

and I rejoiced to recognise some old friends in three widths of patterned cotton in dusky red, dark blue and deep ochre, printed in simple fashion by my even older friend Tom Wardle, from the woodblocks he brought back from India. It was a surprise, nonetheless, to see in a neighbouring case a fine silk textile from Turkey, labelled as having 'acted as a strong influence on William Morris, who admired the bold structure of the design'. True enough, but as much as the flowing lines and harmonious motifs I admire the glowing yet subdued colours of deep scarlet, steely blue and tarnished gold. It is this blend of elements that makes almost every item of traditional manufacture so superior to the present tinselled trash. But where were any samples of the magnificent Persian carpetwork in which the museum is so rich? Why were these omitted in favour of the dull if inoffensive kelim rug that the museum purchased for a mere ten guineas from Liberty's emporium, on the advice of my dull (if inoffensive) friend Ned Poynter? The same case held a fine Rhodian dish with a ship in full sail, such as de Morgan and I so long coveted, until he began to make them himself, and an elaborate Moorish vase from Spain, that we first saw among the Art Treasures in Manchester. Today I think the shape too contrived for true elegance, but the lustre colours – the same dull reds and blues on gold – remain triumphant.

Moving on – in my dream state I did not need to dawdle – the exhibits brought from the Pacific regions were too grotesque to be pleasing, except in the way of Gothic carving on capitals and gargoyles. Nor did the Americas furnish much worth remarking – a few poor samples of degraded beadwork alongside the modern manufactures that exterminated their makers: Colt revolvers, rifles, harpoon guns. Thence to 'Africa', where I smiled to see Dr Livingstone's famous cap and compass in the same case as gold and silver ware looted by our forces in the Ashanti wars, two Mahdist spears from Khartoum and a great game rifle fit for a latter-day Herne, all cheek by jowl with packets of soap and cocoa, signifying the 'benefits of civilization'. Nothing could more neatly illustrate the theft of materials from other parts of the globe, to be manufactured in Britain and returned back to the original producers, at five times the price.

As in a dream, the exhibition then returned 'home' as we turned the last corner, transforming itself into a section devoted to Work – by which the organisers plainly meant industrial work. Here I saw a dockers' union banner, displaying the art and industry of the people, and a painting of John Burns, our first MP to represent working people, orating to an open air political meeting. Strange to say, however, in their flowered hats and frock coats the crowd was quite unlike any our League ever attracted at the street corner, and it was far larger too: I began to wonder if the artist was ever at an outdoor gathering of working folk.

High on the walls throughout the galleries, as I now began to notice, were painted quotations similar to those sometimes seen in old churches, only here taken from our own time. Among them, it was amusing to see Lord Palmerston's belief that 'commerce is the best pioneer of civilisation' and (a little further on) my own rejoinder, 'the chief duty of a civilised world today is to set about making labour happy for all'. Not that there was the least sign of that, anywhere about.

Some more dull and murky pictures – by Mr Fildes among others – purported to represent the real life of our urban poor with a deal of sentiment but no true feeling. In contrast the elaborate working models of steamships and locomotives

were, in their way, strong evidences of solid, unsung manual skill. Better by far to hammer a thousand copper rivets, or temper a steel piston, than paint an ugly, superfluous picture. Near to this section was a listening device in which one could hear the latest products of Mr Edison's recording phonograph. The samples included Mr Gladstone, Miss Nightingale, Mr Irving and that song from the recent operetta called *Patience*. Foolish though it be, the lines about walking down Piccadilly with a poppy or a lily never fail to make me laugh.

After this were some samples of moving photographs such as I do not think I had ever seen before. They were very jerky and short, no doubt mere demonstrations of the latest new inventions such as our age delights in. I cannot think they will ever be of use, except to distract the people from their misery.

I declined to applaud what proved the final exhibit – a maxim gun – before being somehow expelled from the galleries into a shopping arcade, piled with fancy wares under bright lights, which at first I took to be part of the show, until with a muttered curse I shook my head and woke, in my own bed. The glittering and confused spectacle vanished, as I asked myself: is this how our Victorian age will be remembered?

Inventing New Britain: The Victorian Vision was at the Victoria and Albert Museum from 5 April – 29 July 2001.