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Review

Katherine Haskins, *The Art-Journal and Fine Art Publishing in Victorian England, 1850-1880*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2012. 213 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4094-1810-8, € 77.

The Art-Journal and Fine Art Publishing in Victorian England, 1850–1880 is, alas, not the definitive book on the famous and influential Victorian art periodical, if such a comprehensive and undoubtedly voluminous study could ever be written. However, this more modest volume, authored by Katherine Haskins, does offer a pointed argument on a particular aspect of *The Art-Journal's* activities: the publication of more than 800 fine art prints included as an extra in the journal between 1850 and 1880.

In the introduction to her book, Haskins takes issue with the well-known (but by now, certainly outdated) modernist rejection of most of the art production of Victorian England. Victorian paintings and prints have often been condemned as anodyne, sentimental and, in general, too much adapted to popular taste and subjected to the commercial exigencies of the market place. In lieu of this form of elitism, to which modernism's anti-commercial mythography has been part and parcel, Haskins pleads for an art history that

recognizes the intricate connections between art and commerce and, as a result, between art and the broader public targeted by such publishers of prints and periodicals as *The Art-Journal*. Accordingly, Haskins sets out in her book to develop an engaging argument on the interplay in *The Art-Journal's* fine art publishing of 'high art ideals, commercial production methods, modern publicity, and advocacy journalism'. The main thrust of her argument is that *The Art-Journal's* publication strategy aimed to translate high art ideals to a broader public and that this process was facilitated, rather than opposed, by commercial considerations.

In the first chapter, Haskins introduces *The Art-Journal's* fine art publishing both as part of a larger visual and textual continuum and as a particular artistic and commercial enterprise, with its related difficulties and opportunities. The author also pays attention here to some of the debates of the time on the merits and dangers of prints and discusses *The Art-Journal's* leading role in the promotion of steel engravings as well as John Ruskin's defence of line engraving 'as a form of noble labor' as opposed to more mechanical and therefore 'unartistic' techniques. In the second

chapter, which stands somewhat alone, the author sketches a quick history of *The Art-Journal* and its main protagonists, especially the journal's long-time editor Samuel Carter Hall. This chapter brings little new material, but it does set the stage for the main argument that develops in the two subsequent sections.

The third chapter deals with four series of fine art prints published by *The Art Journal*: the series of prints after paintings from the collection of Robert Vernon (1849-1854), the series of prints after works from the Royal Collection (1854-1861), the series of 'selected pictures' after works from various private galleries (1862-1880), and the so-called 'Turner Gallery', after paintings by J.M.W. Turner (1860-1873). Discussing the first three of these series, Haskins weaves together two distinct but interrelated narratives centring on patronage, patriotism and taste, arguing that the publication of these series firstly stimulated private patronage of modern British art as a patriotic enterprise and, secondly, spread the equally patriotic love for a British national art amongst a broader middle-class audience. Turning to the Turner Gallery, the author's argument shifts to a discussion of the translation of Turner's paintings, which were often difficult to read for the untrained eye, into much more accessible and easily readable engravings, which effectively 'domesticated or familiarized' Turner's work 'by translating their color into something rational, intelligible, and non-threatening'. Here, the author reaches her main argument, which is further developed in the fourth and last chapter.

In this final chapter, the author argues that the notion of domestication is key to a proper understanding of *The Art-Journal's* fine art publishing and its editorial line, and, in fact, of much of the Victorian art production in general. Much of *The Art-Journal's* efforts were aimed, in accordance with this argument, to the translation of high-brow artistic, cultural and moral ideals to a comparatively broad middle-class readership, or, in other words, to bringing these ideals in an accessible way into the houses of the burgeoning bourgeois audience. Haskins develops this intriguing argument by means of two case studies: firstly, the domestication of religious imagery by the emphasis laid in relation to prints after Raphaellesque pictures depicting saints or the Holy Family on humanist notions with which the audience could identify, such as the idea of motherhood in depictions of the Holy Mary; and secondly, the mediation of high art ideals in the hugely popular prints after pictures by Sir Edwin Landseer, the 'Raphael des chiens', which effectively translated these ideals to a more familiar and accessible iconography. In the concluding section of the book, Haskins sums up her argument and makes a passionate and convincing plea for a better integration of a graphic history of nineteenth-century visual practice into the overall history of nineteenth-century art.

Some of the choices made in the book may raise some criticism. It is, for instance, never quite clear why the author places so much emphasis on the technique of manual line engraving, as

opposed to the photographic reproductive techniques introduced in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Did the information conveyed and the instruction offered to the public in *The Art-Journal* really change as a result of these technical developments, as the author seems to suggest? Another choice to question is the representativeness of the examples used by Haskins or, perhaps more to the point, their interconnectedness under the umbrella of the book's central argument: can we really compare the translation of Turner's elusive painterly style into more easily readable prints to the domestication of high art in the sentimental animal scenes by Landseer?

On another level, one may also wonder whether the choice to focus almost exclusively on the fine art prints published by *The Art-Journal*, although understandable from a practical point of view, is justified in light of the larger informational realm, both visual and verbal, to which these prints belonged, according to the author herself. The exclusive attention paid to prints after British pictures may also raise some questions. Haskins mentions, almost in passing, the publication of prints after the works of contemporary foreign artists, as well as two entire series devoted to, respectively, Belgian and German art. The reader is left wondering how this ties in with the patriotic cultural instruction of collectors and readers aimed at by *The Art-Journal*.

This last point raises another: the question of agency and the remarkable absence of art dealers in Haskins' argument. It cannot be a coincidence, for

instance, that almost all of the artists featured in *The Art-Journal's* series on Belgian art were marketed in London by the famous (and in fact Belgian-born) art dealer Ernest Gambart. Not only did Gambart know as no other how to play the press, his interest in many of these Belgian artists seems to have been raised initially by Henry Mogford, a collaborator on *The Art-Journal* in the 1840s and 1850s. Although Haskins admits that *The Art-Journal's* discourse and activities were part of a larger commercial and informational nexus, the book does sometimes give the impression that the developments described in the journal were mainly due to the journal's own editorial policy.

In the end, however, *The Art-Journal and Fine Art Publishing in Victorian England* offers a compelling argument that is especially interesting in the questions that it raises about the interrelatedness of art and commerce, about the constitution and instruction of different art audiences, and about the development of taste in Victorian England. The book's main argument thus fulfils, at least to a certain extent, the author's ambition to examine not only the debt owed by the print to its original, but also the debt owed by the original to its reproduction.

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