Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

The Edwardian Sense: Art, Design, and Performance in Britain, 1901-1910

Review Number:
1121
Publish date:
Thursday, 1 September, 2011
Editor:
Morna O'Neill
Michael Hatt
ISBN:
9780300163353
Date of Publication:
2010
Price:
£45.00
Pages:
336pp.
Publisher:
Yale University Press
Place of Publication:
New Haven, CT
Reviewer:
Ryan Linkof

By all accounts, ?the Edwardian? is a difficult historical period to define. Sandwiched between two momentous historical eras, the Edwardian years seem to lack a coherent identity of their own. Technically coinciding with Edward VII?s reign (1901?10), the period is not always easy to parse from the Late Victorian era, and can easily bleed into the Georgian years before the outbreak of the First World War, which has meant that it tends to function as a nebulous buffer between the world of the 19th century and that of the 20th. This liminality has meant that the Edwardian era has become perhaps the most mythologized moment in modern British history, constructed in novels, films, and nostalgic memoirs as the last gasp of Old England before the cataclysm of world war. The authors of *The Edwardian Sense*, in defiance of this mythology, identify and analyze the unique characteristics of the Edwardian era, interrogating the role of art and visual culture in constituting what it meant to be Edwardian.

In its effort to define what was distinctively ?Edwardian? about Edwardian visual culture, the book unites a particular social history of the Edwardian years with an art historical analysis of the evolution of aesthetic modernism. Political and social historians have their own way of defining the first decade of the 20th century as a moment of tumult, a bumpy transition from the Victorian world driven by the agitation of labor

unions, feminists, and Home Rulers.(1) For their part, art historians have taken 1910 ? the year of Roger Fry?s epochal exhibition *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* ? as a moment of definitive rupture between the Victorian and the ?modern?.(2) The essays in *The Edwardian Sense* borrow from and offer correctives to these two approaches, showing how the social unrest of the Edwardian era was reflected in and constituted by developments in art, architecture, music, and popular visual culture. Modernism in Britain developed out the interplay between aesthetic theory, artistic practice, popular entertainment, and social contestation. In the words of the co-editor Morna O?Neill, ?artistic modernism is not merely a matter of style; rather, as the Edwardian art world demonstrates, it is also a product of politics and public debate, as well as exhibitions, publicity, and organizations? (p. 6). In its combination of social history and art history, the work brings together 18 different scholarly voices from different disciplinary perspectives, offering analyses of painting, sculpture, the decorative arts, film, international exhibitions, and the mass media.

Paradoxes abound in Edwardian culture, and the essays quite successfully encapsulate the antinomies that lay behind the ?Edwardian sense?. A series of ostensible binaries were constantly blurred in the period, butting up against each other and animating much of the visual culture of the era: private and public; spectacle and spectator; art and decoration; motion and stasis; country and city; and metropole and colony. Lynda Nead?s essay on various forms of mobility and image making in the Edwardian years is the most effective at addressing this issue of the paradoxes of the era, and her definition of the ?Edwardian sense? is perhaps the most succinct. She argues that the term can be used ?to describe a historical character or quality that differentiated itself form nineteenth-century Victorianism but that, at the same time, drew on many elements of that epoch? (p. 106). One of the defining features of the era, and the visual forms that emerged at the time, was a combination of the breathtakingly new and the reassuringly old.(3)

The collection of essays is subdivided into three thematic sections, although the authors speak to one another across these boundaries. The first cluster of essays ventures beyond the paradigms of traditional art history, and into a broader study of visual and commercial culture subsumed under the heading of ?Spectacle?. A trio of short essays analyzing Edward VII?s coronation festivities in 1902 provides insight into the role of patriotic display at the start of the new century. The first of these essays, Tom Gunning?s all-too-brief examination of the films commemorating the coronation, is the most interesting of the three, particularly in its acknowledgement of the importance of new media, cinema in particular, in altering how the public could expect to see and experience the lives of the monarchy. The two essays that follow (unfortunately illustrated by some very poor reproductions from the BFI digital archive) provide insightful analysis of the coronation procession as an urban event, limited by and determinative of the spaces of London as a ?theatre? of popular entertainments.

Spectacular urban entertainments were marked by the tension between the demands of mass society and the endurance of traditional ideas of social order. Deborah Sugg Ryan?s study of international exhibitions and the outbreak of ?pageantitis? in 1908 illustrates the highly participatory nature of spectacular events and identifies the ?agency and transgressions of the public? (p. 64), despite official attempts to dictate how these events should be consumed. Ryan offers insight into some of the peculiarly Edwardian nature of pageantry. Although these events often drew upon mythologies of an English past, ?to see pageants as ?a protest against ?modernity??? is an oversimplification ... The modernity of Edwardian pageants was not necessarily located in their subject matter but in their spectacular and participatory nature, which was dependent on modern mass society? (p. 54). This seemingly paradoxical nature of Edwardian mass culture surfaces in several of the essays in this section, most notably David Gilbert?s essay on the 1908 Olympic Games in London. The pull between a mass society and one that still was embedded in social hierarchies was evident in the structure of the gargantuan suburban White City stadium in which the events took place. Boldly functional in its design, the building was not a utopian vision inspired by modernist principles of social equalization, but rather a design ? much like the Edwardian suburbs that had emerged around it ? based on pragmatic principles of fitting as many people as possible into the space, each according to their class and station.

The next section of the book, ?Setting?, grapples with the role of the domestic interior in Edwardian social life, popular theatre, and artistic practice. Three essays dedicated to William Nicholson?s enigmatic painting *The Conder Room* seek to explicate that painting?s odd use of reflection, its visual plays on the divide

between inside and outside of the bourgeois drawing room, and its attention to the disconcerting elements that lurk beneath the seeming tranquility of Edwardian domesticity. The most insightful of the three essays, the joint effort of Barbara Penner and Charles Rice, suggests that ?Rather than a portrait of the bourgeois interior?s triumph, *The Conder Room* testifies to its dissolution? (p. 132). This articulation of the troubled and troubling Edwardian interior is echoed in Christopher Reed?s extremely cleverly written piece analyzing the stylistic peculiarities of Edwardian architecture and décor. He argues, ?The Edwardian interior, as it appeared in fiction, seemed ? an obligation so onerous that it had to be escaped or ? an ideal so fugitive that it could not be sustained. Individualism, the quality that Edwardians looked to interiors to signify, was an ever-receding ideal, fundamental to middle-class identity under capitalism, yet increasingly impossible to enact in a culture dominated by mass-produced objects and mass-mediated imagery? (p. 184). Taken together, these essays manage to encapsulate the centrality, but also the fraught nature, of the home in Edwardian life.

The final group of essays, organized under the heading ?Place?, brings together a hodgepodge of somewhat disparate topics relating to issues of landscape, nation, and the internationalization of cultural production. As with the other sections, this one begins with three essays focused on one particular object, in this case George Frampton?s statue of Peter Pan, erected in Hyde Park in 1912. The statue immediately became a source of contention, sparking debate about the role of public statuary and its role in spaces of recreation. The most insightful essay of the three, Martina Droth?s ?Making Sculpture and the Two Worlds of *Peter Pan* ?, digs beneath the layers of cliché and sentimentality of the Peter Pan figure in order to better understand Frampton?s innovative sculptural technique, evident most especially in the sculpture?s dramatic pedestal. Frampton?s rough, tempestuous form, ?shows a world that is turbulent and potentially oppressive but also shifting and in flux? (p. 220). Through such insights, Droth implicitly suggests that the sculpture shares much with the historical moment in which it was created. Frampton?s sculptural experimentation was of a piece with the fundamental tensions of the Edwardian era.

The remaining essays in the section provide insight into the internationalism of Edwardian culture. Tim Barringer?s enjoyable study of the composer Edward Elgar does an excellent job of illustrating the complex mythologies of landscape in the Edwardian imagination. For Elgar, Barringer contends, urban and rural, English and colonial, were not neatly confined areas of aesthetic interest. While the composer certainly drew upon concepts of the English landscape, informed by contemporary developments in painterly art, it is also true that ?Elgar?s art belongs on the margins, in the interstices between city and country, north and south, and triangulated between province, metropole, and colony? (p. 231). This blurring of national boundaries is taken even further by the final two essays of the book, which take up the issue of the ?cosmopolitanism? of British artistic production in the first decade of the 20th century. Moving beyond the much-discussed Franco-British affiliations of the Edwardian years, Andrew Stephenson reveals the importance of a broad international art market in which the British played a key role. Most significantly, the activities of the International Society of Sculptors, Painters and Gravers (founded in London in 1898) helped to ?establish a new cosmopolitan context for understanding contemporary international developments in painting, sculpture, and printmaking? (p. 272). Perhaps the most important and enduring internationalist legacy of British art ? the Arts and Crafts movement ? is the point of entry for Morna O?Neill?s concluding essay. She illustrates how by 1900 the Arts and Crafts movement had become an English national style, which meant that it functioned as a vehicle for the playing out of domestic and international politics. O?Neill shows how the social politics of the Edwardian years mapped onto, and were forged by, divisions within the movement. Ending with an analysis of the murals produced for the Houses of Parliament by Henry A. Payne, a product of a particular strain of Arts and Crafts aesthetics, her essay is the most insistent upon uniting the political and artistic transformations of the Edwardian years.

The Edwardian Sense makes an important contribution to a relatively misunderstood period of art and cultural history. It was not entirely clear to me, at the outset, why it was necessary to push for a defense of periodization, especially for a period that is so small and relatively arbitrary in its boundaries (even the authors do not cease their analyses in 1910). This collection of essays, however, does make a good case for the specificity of the Edwardian as a distinct and historically valuable period of study. Subsuming the

Edwardian period into the Victorian ? as is often done for pragmatic reasons ? seems to enact a historical injustice on a period that is a fulcrum for historical and aesthetic transformations in Britain. The essays in this text succeed at encapsulating the contradictions, uncertainties, and innovations that animated visual practices in the decade after the death of Victoria. Each section of the text provides a distinct view into how Edwardians manufactured, contemplated, and attempted to remedy the problems and anxieties of a period in transition. The powerful role of visual culture in effecting historical and cultural change ? from the proliferation of cinema and the photographic press, to experimentation in decorative arts, painting, sculpture and theater ? is clearly without doubt. The essays paint a picture, as it were, of a period where questions of visual form, design, and spectacular display were at the center of momentous historical debate and change.

Though I appreciated the verve with which these many essays were marshaled toward a common cause ? a feat that is never easy to pull off ? the structure of the text was not an unqualified success. The necessary repetition involved in the choice to include three essays on a single subject led to a level of redundancy ? especially in the case of *The Conder Room* ? that might have been remedied by a more diverse approach to the subject. Offering close readings of an object ? especially one as enigmatic and visually complex as Nicholson?s painting ? seems a very worthy exercise, but not, I would think, if those separate essays come to basically the same conclusion. One might have expected a bit more diversity in the kinds of subjects on offer. Conversely, the third section of the text ? ?Place? ? seemed an artificial grouping, with subjects a bit too disparate to be forced together under a shared subheading. This left me a bit confused as to the motive and intellectual benefit of linking essays on Frampton?s *Peter Pan* and the role of British artists in the Austrian Secession. The essays, taken on their own, are each rather engaging, but the intellectual project of the challenge to Edwardian ideas of ?place? was rather muddled.

To the book?s detriment, much of what is being revised in this revisionist history is never effectively addressed. It may have helped bolster the fundamental claims of the authors if some attention was paid to the subjects that have apparently dominated the traditional art historical narrative of the era. Though the subject is analyzed briefly and summarily dismissed in the introduction to the book, how, exactly, do these essays make us rethink Fry?s blustery advocacy of French modernism? What of the aesthetic innovations of the Camden Town Group, or of the orthodoxy of the Royal Academy? Though the attempt to transcend the canonical concerns of traditional art history is undoubtedly commendable, it was also essential for these essays to help us rethink why an alternative narrative of the period has, and may continue to, dominate the scholarship of the period.

The authors should be commended for their conscientious attempts to unite close formal analysis of objects with a considered engagement with social politics. Informed by a model of social art history, these essays indicate the enduring importance of art historical scholarship that recognizes art?s role in the broader social sphere, not only within a framework of aesthetic theory and narrow questions of medium or solipsistic meditations on the individual experience of art. The authors have sought, and found, a productive middle ground between the identity politics that animated much social art history in the late 1980s and 1990s and a purely formalist art history that threatens to become fashionable again. The authors manage to tell a story that is at once a close analysis of visual form and style, as well as a deeply contextual look into a dynamic and influential period in the history of Britain and the world. My hope would be that this book inspires similar investigations into the interaction of British art, mass visual culture, and social history.

Notes

1. The most influential of these works is George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (1935; repr., New York, 1980). See also David Powell, *British Politics, 1910?1935: The Crisis of the Party System* (London, 2004).Back to (1)
2. See in particular, Anna Gruetzner Robins, *Modern Art in Britain, 1910?1914* (London, 1997); *Art Made Modern: Roger Fry?s Vision of Art*, ed. Christopher Green (London, 1999).Back to (2)
3. This fundamental paradox ? the clashing of the archaic and the modern ? is a fundamental feature of British cultural history. See in particular *Meanings of Modernity: Britain from the Late-Victorian Era to World War II*

, ed. Martin Daunton and Bernhard Rieger (London, 2001).Back to (3)

The authors will respond in due course.

Other reviews:
Times Literary Supplement
http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/the_tls/article7169598.ece [2]
Open Letters Monthly
http://www.openlettersmonthly.com/the-thin-clear-happy-call/ [3]

Source URL: http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1121

Links:
[1] http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7761
[2] http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/the_tls/article7169598.ece
[3] http://www.openlettersmonthly.com/the-thin-clear-happy-call/