

**Review of ‘Sculpture Victorious: Art in an Age of Invention, 1837–1901’ at Tate Britain, 25 February to 25 May 2015**

**Clare Walker Gore**

At the entrance to the exhibition ‘Sculpture Victorious’, visitors are met in the foyer by John Bell’s *Eagle Slayer* (1851), a beautiful, barely clad youth shooting an invisible arrow into the sky to avenge the death of the lamb who lies at his feet. It is a powerfully arresting piece, but one which is in a sense reassuring, meeting the modern viewer’s expectations — or this modern viewer’s, at least — of what ‘traditional’ Victorian sculpture looks like. It is beautiful, classically inspired (if anything, perhaps slightly more decorous than its classical models, with the carefully placed drapery around the subject’s waist), its subject dramatic but fundamentally untroubling, imparting an air of triumphalism. With its nod to the national anthem, the title of the exhibition seems to acknowledge these preconceptions about Victorian sculpture, suggesting that the pieces on show are not merely Victorian but ‘victorious’, as we might expect of works produced in the heyday of British imperial might and scorned by modernists for their supposed smugness.

What this exhibition goes on to do is to dismantle this set of assumptions. The promised victory turns out to be for variety and innovation rather than for any one style: the works on display range from the medievalist to the proto-modernist, from the magnificent to the miniature, the sublime to the ridiculous. There is plenty of smugness to be found here, and triumphalist imperialist propaganda is in no short supply, but there are also works which speak to doubt, to personal grief and national anxiety. Rather than attempting to tell a single narrative about Victorian sculpture, the curators have chosen pieces that testify to competing ideas about what sculpture could and should do. Far from being excessively academic and earnest, as some hostile press reviews suggested, the exhibition was, in my opinion, enlivened by the curators’ decision to highlight these contrasts by juxtaposing pieces in unexpected ways, setting the traditionally revered and the usually ridiculed alongside one another.<sup>1</sup> This was an exhibition in which a majolica peacock, Hiram Powers’s *Greek Slave*, and an example of

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<sup>1</sup> In his scathing review for the *Daily Telegraph*, Richard Dorment charged the exhibition with resembling ‘an extended academic lecture’, particularly objecting to the juxtaposition of stylistically and physically dissimilar sculptures. ‘Sculpture Victorious’, *Daily Telegraph*, 23 February 2015 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/11429728/Sculpture-Victorious-Tate-Britain-review-its-incoherence-is-frightening.html>> [accessed 24 February 2016].

decorative leather leaves shared a room — handicraft, curiosity, and High Art displayed cheek by jowl.

This style of exhibiting encouraged a playful, irreverent attitude on the part of the viewer, and seemed designed to counter the perception that Victorian exhibitions are likely to be stuffy or old-fashioned, but it also served a more serious purpose.<sup>2</sup> The juxtaposition of art and artefact, and consequent blurring of boundaries between ‘low’ and ‘high’, formed a crucial part of the exhibition’s attempt to interrogate what was distinctive about Victorian sculpture, and how the field was opened up by technological, social, and economic change. The decision to include objects not traditionally seen as ‘sculpture’ is, of course, taken in the context of a wider debate about how the art of any era should be understood; as curator Martina Droth explained in an interview, the exhibition is intended to ‘show how sculpture resists categorization. It is almost impossible, for example, to draw a line between “sculpture” and other forms of “decorative” or “plastic” arts.’<sup>3</sup> However, this argument is particularly pertinent to the Victorian period, in which the developing mass market for reproductions of art and decorative artefacts, new technologies which enabled the production of these goods, and new modes and audiences for artistic commission and exhibition meant that the boundaries between high and popular culture became ever more porous. As curators Jason Edwards and Michael Hatt have pointed out, this was an era which saw ‘a proliferation of kinds of sculptural object’, and for an exhibition to attempt to enforce distinctions which were far from clear in the period would be to falsify its history.<sup>4</sup> The suggestion that the curators should have included only ‘first-rate’ pieces in the exhibition, and had let viewers down by including the ‘second-rate’ (Dorment), reflects a very particular view of how art should be understood and curated, a desire to insulate canonical works from their context which the curators of this exhibition explicitly wished to resist. As a literary critic, I recognize the ground being fought over, recalling the familiar questions of whether reading lists should include only ‘first-rate’ works, whether George Eliot should be taught alongside M. E. Braddon, and Charles Reade alongside Charles Dickens; or whether ‘great literature’ is best understood as a rarefied genre of its own. Viewers will have to make up their own minds about how the curators’ approach worked on the

<sup>2</sup> As the reviewer from the *Economist* puts it, “Victorian sculpture” is a phrase that can make the heart sink. One thinks of dreary monuments and dour busts.’ A.C., ‘Victorian Sculpture at the Tate’, *Economist*, 25 February 2015 <<http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospiero/2015/02/victorian-sculpture-tate>> [accessed 24 February 2016].

<sup>3</sup> Martina Droth in conversation with Jon Wood, ‘On Re-Displaying Victorian Sculpture’, *Sculpture Journal*, 23 (2014), 221–30 (p. 222).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Hatt and Jason Edwards, ‘Introduction: Displaying Victorian Sculpture’, *Sculpture Journal*, 23 (2014), 127–30 (p. 127).

ground; personally, I felt that it was vindicated by the exhibition it produced. Certainly, viewers who wished to be shown only ‘first-rate’ artworks are unlikely to have enjoyed an exhibition which included some comically ugly things, but in its eclecticism the exhibition offered viewers something that is arguably more valuable: the opportunity to interrogate ideas about what constitutes ‘first-rate’ art.

This points to the second major difficulty that the curators faced in mounting the first ever major retrospective exhibition of Victorian sculpture. It is not simply that some critics object to the inclusion of ‘second-rate’ Victorian sculpture, but that some do not recognize that ‘first-rate’ Victorian sculpture exists at all. While critics of Victorian literature are no longer an embattled vanguard, and the once unfashionable ‘loose baggy monsters’ of nineteenth-century fiction are firmly back in vogue,<sup>5</sup> it seems that curators and historians of Victorian sculpture are still struggling against a hostile critical environment. Even those reviewers who enjoyed the exhibition apparently felt that they should apologize for doing so, and to acknowledge that the Victorians really had terrible taste in art.<sup>6</sup> I suspect that this critical hostility to the aesthetics of Victorian sculpture explains the extraordinary fact that such an exhibition has never been attempted before; as Hatt and Edwards have argued, ‘Victorian sculpture has been [. . .] discussed in terms of decline’ because ‘twentieth-century taste has tended to trump nineteenth-century history’ (p. 128). In this context, I think the curators are to be commended for resisting the temptation to select only those pieces that would least offend modern taste, choosing instead to showcase a broad range of works, ranging from those likely to charm modern viewers to those likely to appal, and often placing them side by side.

In the first room, the most recognizable Victorian of them all, Queen Victoria herself, is given pride of place. If there is something slightly cruel

<sup>5</sup> Henry James, preface to *The Tragic Muse* (New York: Scribner, 1908), p. x.

<sup>6</sup> Peter York of the *Independent* jokingly called his taste for Victorian art a ‘virus’ before reassuring readers that his partiality did not extend to these sculptures, which he found ‘uncomfortable’ viewing; Laura Cumming of the *Observer* praised the curators for recognizing the ‘monstrosity’ of some exhibits but criticized their ‘outlandish’ claim that the Victorian era was a golden age for sculpture, while the *Guardian*’s Adrian Searle simply declared the exhibition ‘insufferable’. Peter York, ‘19th Century Sculpture: Propaganda for the British Empire, or Middle Class Frippery?’, *Independent*, 11 February 2015 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/19th-century-sculpture-propaganda-for-the-british-empire-or-middle-class-frippery-10039836.html>>; Laura Cumming, ‘Sculpture Victorious Review’, *Observer*, 1 March 2015 <<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/mar/01/sculpture-victorious-tate-britain-review-observer-best-and-worst-patriotic-era>>; Adrian Searle, ‘Sculpture Victorious Review’, *Guardian*, 23 February 2015 <<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/feb/23/sculpture-victorious-review-tate-britain>> [all accessed 24 February 2016].

about juxtaposing Francis Chantrey's sensual bust of the nineteen-year-old queen — which made much of her bare neck and shoulders, and flowing, looping plaits of hair, surmounted by a tasteful tiara — and Alfred Gilbert's commemorative bust for her Golden Jubilee, depicting her in many-chinned, heavy-lidded, massively regal, and magnificently grumpy old age, it did encourage reflection on the shifting image of the queen over the course of her long reign, and the public uses to which such images were put. Further reflection on these ideas was prompted by the display of coins and medals from around the empire, including a First Class Order of Victoria and Albert medal in which a cameo of the queen is set in a diamond-encrusted frame so ostentatious that I took it at first for a lady's brooch.

A major theme of the exhibition is introduced by the display about Benjamin Cheverton's Reducing Machine, which enabled miniature ivory reproductions of Chantrey's bust to be produced and sold to patriotic citizens wanting to bring the queen's profile into their own homes. The age-old strategy of popularizing the monarchy by making the monarch's image ubiquitous is given a new twist here by the technological innovation of the period, highlighted by the exhibition's subtitle, 'Art in an Age of Invention'. The effect of the Industrial Revolution on sculpture is a running theme; in fact, it can be seen even in Bell's *Eagle Slayer*, the apparently traditional opening piece. Rather than being cast in bronze, this prizewinner of the Great Exhibition was fashioned out of painted iron produced by the massive Coalbrookdale foundry in Shropshire, famous for having produced cast iron rails for the new railways, and the first cast iron bridge.

Modern technology and aesthetic nostalgia come together once again in the Medievalist room, in which royal propaganda gives way to parliamentary self-fashioning. James Sherwood Westmacott's statue *Baron Saher de Quincy, Earl of Winchester* (1848–53) stands proudly against a crimson background, brought down from its usual alcove high up in the chamber of the House of Lords. Up close, the fine detail of the figure's chain mail and sword-belt can be appreciated, as can the naturalism of the folds of cloth. If Victorian parliamentarians were keen to indulge in medievalist fantasy, however, by styling themselves the heirs of the barons of Magna Carta, the statue is as much an embodiment of industrial innovation as nostalgic myth-making. It was the technique of electroplating, pioneered by industrialists in Birmingham, which enabled the sculptor to achieve this detail in a work which looks like it has been cast in bronze, but is in fact made of zinc electroplated with copper — a cheaper and more modern alternative.

No such expense was spared in the production of Edmund Cotterill's *Eglinton Trophy*, a towering structure of solid silver in which knights on

horseback cavort upon a base bearing coats of arms. This magnificent piece was presented to the thirteenth Earl of Eglinton in the 1843 commemoration of a jousting tournament by friends who must have had more money than sense, since the £1775 cost of the trophy was met by subscriptions. This extravagantly, self-consciously anachronistic piece — which claimed to ‘commemorate the revival of the days of chivalry’ — is as egregious an example of aristocratic delusions of grandeur as can be seen anywhere, and it provides a fascinating insight into the aspirations and anxieties of the mid-Victorian elite.

The Classical room illustrates a very different aspect of Victorian self-understanding, looking to ancient Greece and Rome rather than to medieval Christendom for inspiration (and perhaps legitimation). The pieces here present much less of a challenge to modern taste: Frederic Leighton’s *Athlete Wrestling with a Python* (1877) and Hamo Thornycroft’s *Teucer* (1882), dynamic bronzes depicting improbably muscular, strikingly beautiful youths performing athletic feats in the nude, have lost none of their power and grace; while the technical bravura of Raffaele Monti’s *Veiled Vestal* (1846–47), in which the illusion of translucent, draping fabric is achieved in marble with breathtaking skill, is bound to impress. The *Devonshire Parure* is breathtaking in a very different sense: the sheer opulence of this set of antique jewels, refashioned in the latest style for Countess Granville to wear to Tsar Alexander II’s coronation in 1856, is jaw-dropping. It is impossible not to gawk at the size of the diamonds and amethysts; up close, it is the delicacy of their gold and enamel settings, and the intricacy of the cameos, which draws the eye. The fusion of classical and early modern styles is — for better or worse — distinctively Victorian; whatever you make of the combination of Renaissance cameos and intaglios, with ancient Greek and Roman jewels, set in Tudor-style metalwork with extraordinarily delicate enamel decoration, it has to be seen to be believed.

As you might expect, the pieces on display in the Great Exhibitions room are mostly on an impressive scale, but, once again, the curators brought pieces together in unexpected and suggestive ways. Some of the pieces here showcase technical skill above all else, such as the enormous ceramic elephant made by Thomas Longmore and John Hénk for the 1889 Paris Exposition, and the six foot high, multicoloured majolica peacock produced in 1873 by Paul Comolera, commissioned by Minton to showcase the brightness of their lead-glazing. Technical skill of a rather different sort can be seen in Thomas Wallis’s extremely intricate *Partridge and Ivy* (1871), hand-carved from a single block of lime wood, and a welcome reminder that this era of technological and industrial innovation was also a period of tremendous nostalgia for the handmade, in which handicrafts flourished. Just how bizarre some of these crafts can seem at this distance of time is illustrated by the ornamental leather leaves on display; the idea

of cutting leather into the shape of leaves and then painstakingly treating and varnishing it to look like wood is familiar to me from fiction of the period, so it was fascinating to see a surviving example of this strange craft.<sup>7</sup> What Talia Schaffer calls the ‘uneven compromise between the older handcrafted artefact and the newer mass-produced commodity’, which she suggests fuelled the craze for handicraft in the mid-Victorian period (p. 14), is perfectly captured by the juxtaposition of these handmade items with the mass-produced miniature figurines of John Bell’s classical-style sculptures *Purity* and *Voluptuousness*, available to every bourgeois home for just £3 3s.

Nearly a metre wide, gleaming in silver and gold plate, and unashamedly triumphalist, the *Outram Shield* (c. 1858–62) embodies a way of thinking about empire which is, if anything, more alien than the aesthetic taste which would admire those hideous leather leaves. Commemorating the relief of the Siege of Lucknow during the Sepoy Uprising in India, it depicts General Outram handing over his command, literally riding roughshod over the enemies of the empire. Just across the room, however, the viewer is confronted with a very different representation and response to empire and imperialism: Hiram Powers’s *Greek Slave* (1851) stands close by John Bell’s *American Slave* (the original plaster cast of which was entitled *A Daughter of Eve*), made just two years later, and read as a response to Powers’s hugely popular sculpture. Both statues deal with the theme of slavery, but only the second implicates the British Empire.

Powers’s sculpture of a Christian woman being sold in a Turkish slave market after being captured during the Greek War of Independence was perhaps the most celebrated sculpture of the period. Inspired by the *Venus de’ Medici* in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, and begun while Powers was working there, the *Greek Slave* was exhibited to great acclaim throughout the US and Europe — but it was only after several years that abolitionists began to take it as a symbol for their cause. As a fervent believer in abolition, Bell was inspired to respond with a sculpture which reminded the British public that the slave trade was alive and well at the present time, if not in the British Empire itself, then in one of Britain’s major trading partners. The two statues are formally similar, but it is their dissimilarities which are striking: whereas Powers’s naked Greek woman is dazzlingly white, ineffectually covering her modesty in the style of a coy nymph, modestly averting her eyes and making a mute appeal for the viewer’s sympathy, Bell’s sculpture is a dark bronze, and his semi-clothed model unmistakably black. Perhaps more importantly, she is also beautiful;

<sup>7</sup>Talia Schaffer offers a very helpful account of the significance of leather leaves as part of her discussion of the ‘craft paradigm’ in relation to Victorian fiction in *Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 95–96.

instead of drawing on conventionally racist depictions of African women as hyper-sexualized or in some way risible in their difference from European women, Bell's slave is both frail and dignified, her averted gaze somehow suggesting defiance or even contempt for those who appraise her, rather than appealing for their pity. Both women have the figure of a classical nymph, and both hold their chained hands to one side in a kind of perversion of the nymph's traditional pose, but Bell brings a troubling touch of realism to his work. The strain of the woman's posture is captured in telling details: the fragile bones of her neck stand out, her fingers clutch. While both sculptures are fundamentally sentimental, and both could reasonably be charged with voyeurism, there seems to me a crucial difference between Powers's orientalist nightmare (or fantasy?) of abused Christian womanhood and Bell's *American Slave*. The latter forces its viewers to confront an uncomfortable political reality, bringing them face to face with the darker side of colonialism, not the glittering victories of the *Outram Shield*, but the obscenities of the slave market. Certainly, it makes its point in a distinctively Victorian way, but comparing this sculpture to the other works in the room is a useful reminder that even at the height of British expansionism and imperialist ambition, there was no single 'Victorian' way to think about race or empire.

One way, certainly, involved self-congratulatory celebrations of imperial might, and the Commemoration room which follows reminds us of the scale upon which these were undertaken in sculptural form. A film depicts the unveiling of a massive statue of Queen Victoria soon after her death, while a series of photographs show how these statues proliferated around the empire, alongside sketches for the almost ludicrously expensive monument to Wellington, which cost £20,000 and took sixty years to commission and complete. While I could see that this was the only feasible way to represent monuments which are, by their very nature, almost completely immovable, this was probably the least engaging part of the exhibition, perhaps because photographs of sculpture seemed underwhelming immediately before and after being confronted with the real thing, or perhaps simply because this is the most familiar and least interesting aspect of Victorian sculpture to many of us, accustomed as we are to seeing these commemorative statues in every town and city square.

The final room of the exhibition, devoted to Arts and Crafts, did not suffer from either problem, offering an exciting array of late nineteenth-century works that truly came in all shapes and styles. While certain themes were recurrent, with medievalism informing most of the pieces on show here and the shift towards art nouveau clearly present in the later works, the sheer variety of the display made for a suitably dramatic finish. One or two of the pieces, such as Edward Onslow Ford's *St George and the Dragon Salt Cellar* (1901), struck a comical note. Impressive as the

technical skills on display are, and opulent as the miniature sculpture is — worked in silver, marble, ivory, and lapis lazuli — the smug little knight brandishing his sword atop a small, drooping-winged dragon is irresistibly ridiculous. Yet this taste for the medievalist, the fascination with mixed media, and the move away from high realist ideals clearly informs the beautiful Burne-Jones bas-relief panel *Perseus and the Graiae* (1878), and even George Frampton's bronze *My Thoughts Are My Children* (1894), in which art nouveau begins to shade into abstract modernism. I enjoyed the playful juxtaposition of the salt cellar with these lovely reliefs, suggestive as it was of the different forms that artistic movements take and the different ends to which they are put. The imposing statue *Dame Alice Owen* (George Frampton, 1897), worked in marble, alabaster, bronze, paint, and gilding, her face and hands startlingly white against her dark dress and gold-tipped walking stick and prayer book, demonstrated how public art was inflected by the avant-garde: this was commissioned for a school. Another imposing female figure was provided by William Reynolds-Stephens's enormous bronze *A Royal Game* (1906–11), in which Elizabeth I and Philip of Spain play a game of chess with galleons, dripping in jewels and towering over passers-by.

While female forms are everywhere here, it was a shame that female sculptors received so little space and attention. However, the Mary Seton Watts relief that was included in this final room was a powerful exception, a beautiful and troubling triptych panel worked in bronze, entitled *Death Crowning Innocence*, and depicting the angel of death cradling a baby. The angel's powerful wings frame the image, seemingly closing and about to hide the child from view, while her long hands cover the baby's face in a movement both tender and sinister, her crooning face and bending posture threatening to obliterate the child she nurses. It is an image which recalls the familiar pose of the Mother and Child, but in a twisted, grief-stricken inversion that suggests the theft rather than the deliverance of a child. Watts's title and subject recall her more famous husband's painting by the same name, but having since compared the two works, hers seems to me far richer, an intriguing reimagining of the same subject. I longed to know more about this woman of whom I had never heard, and wished more of her work could have been included.

That is, perhaps, the respect in which the exhibition was ultimately most successful: it convinced me that more such exhibitions were not merely desirable but necessary for the Victorian scholar or enthusiast. Any one of the rooms here could clearly have been expanded into an exhibition of its own; what some critics have regarded as an over-ambitiousness on the part of the curators, a misguided attempt to sample every kind of Victorian sculpture which led to a loss of coherence, struck me as a successful appeal for this to be the first rather than the last exhibition of its



kind. Of course there was insufficient space to do justice to the subject: how could it be otherwise when Victorian sculpture has been so neglected by critics and viewers alike? A more cautious approach, an exploration of one style or facet of Victorian sculpture, or an emphasis on just one of the questions raised by the exhibition, would probably have given the exhibition greater coherence, but might well have been less successful in intriguing visitors and making us want to see more. Whetting an appetite that could not be satisfied by one exhibition was surely the exhibition's greatest achievement.