

Whose service was perfect freedom

The Pre-Raphaelites were at their most original when they closely imitated the Old Masters. By **Charlotte Gere**

Modern Painters, Old Masters: the Art of Imitation from the Pre-Raphaelites to the First World War
Elizabeth Prettejohn

Paul Mellon Centre for British Art, in association with Yale University Press, 288pp, £45 (hb)

Elizabeth Prettejohn, the professor of history of art at the University of York, is here in long-familiar territory, British art and culture in a period of rapid development and experimentation. Originating in her Paul Mellon lectures given at the National Gallery in London in 2011, we are invited to look closely at a particular aspect of forging the Modern, the reception, interpretation and imitation of the Old Masters through the work of artists, from Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Millais, Edward Burne-Jones (who features largely) and Frederic Leighton, to William Orpen, Mark Gertler and Francis Bacon, and through the writings of the magisterial critics of the period, Sir Charles Eastlake, Ruskin, Pater, Alexis-François Rio and Roger Fry. Her frequently invoked guide is none other than Sir Joshua Reynolds and his Discourses, the model for many of Leighton's theories and his self-presentation.

The impressively wide-ranging bibliography shows how far you need to travel in order to unearth a coherent and British-orientated, rather than Franco-centric, narrative. The five chapters take the story through a succession of influential works by Mantegna, Botticelli, Raphael,

Michelangelo, Veronese, van Eyck, Velázquez and (an almost imaginary) Giorgione, among others. Van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait (1434) and its cult of mirrors is examined in depth; the same minute reading is applied to Velázquez's Las Meninas, with strongly argued cases for imitative Victorian and Modern British works that are sometimes surprising though persuasive. As the strands are brought together, Millais progresses from van Eyck to Velázquez and artistic maturity.

On the subject of the influences that contributed to Millais' early Pre-Raphaelite subject, Lorenzo and Isabella (1849), perhaps M.H. Spielmann's suggestion that the steeply receding supper tables in Veronese's Marriage Feast at Cana inspired the supper table in the painting, deserves a mention if the burden of proof – that Millais could have known the Veronese painting at the appropriate date – supports it, awareness and access being ever-present considerations that inevitably determine Prettejohn's whole project.

Coded references to the religious art of the Renaissance emerge in the use of the tondo format and the arched or rounded corners at the top of the support. (In designing neat pages for the book, on occasion the rounded corners have been tidied away, along with the frames.) Implicit in this study, and in the third chapter in particular, is the importance to Victorian paintings of their purpose-made frames. A picture "aspiring to be an altarpiece" or a classical tabernacle is finally achieved with the "architecture" of the frame.

Unprecedented access to the art of the past is the key: old art was a novelty, modern in itself. The rise in museums and galleries is an

achievement for which the Victorians may have felt a certain complacency. The founding of the National Gallery in London in 1824 occupies a pole position, but offerings to the public throughout this period, in the form of loan exhibitions – the ground-breaking Manchester Art Treasures exhibition in 1857, the Royal Academy Winter exhibitions masterminded by Leighton, the Grosvenor Gallery Old Master shows, also in the winter, a list far too long to itemise – may even rival the riches we enjoy today. The great merit of these ventures was that they revealed works that had not been seen in public other than through access to their private owners.

In 1843, Queen Victoria was persuaded to allow the neglected royal treasures at Hampton Court to be restored and put on show (Windsor followed in 1845). Borrowings are traceable in the work of a number of artists who visited often to take advantage of this new source of inspiration. The Renaissance works in particular – along with Raphael's tapestry cartoons (until 1865 and their removal to London) and Mantegna's frescoed Triumph of Caesar – complemented the National Gallery collection, still in its infancy. The rise of middle-class collectors of Old Masters, often also patrons of Modern art, is a factor in this mix of circumstances that made historical works accessible. Several Victorian artists were collectors on a modest scale, with some more successful than others, Rossetti's Botticelli being the subject of much discussion but now fully authenticated. Burne-Jones's "Giorgion" has fared less well.

Vasari's Lives was translated for a popular and inexpensive edition by H&C Bohn between 1850 and 1852. Modern art history was being forged from several strands of criticism. Reproduction of works of art was increasingly sophisticated, and the results widely and cheaply available. Collecting engraved reproductions and photographs is a still neglected aspect of Aesthetic Movement culture; the best of them, prints from the Arundel Society (founded in 1848 to "elevate the tone of our National School of paintings and sculpture") were sufficiently prized to be listed at the top of the advertised attractions in Oscar Wilde's bankruptcy sale. Burne-Jones kept albums of photographs, begged from travelling friends, of



Italian paintings by his most admired Renaissance artists. The intricate web of borrowings includes interest in Old Master prints (Dürer in Burne-Jones's case) and drawings (viz. the loan exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery, winter 1877-78). This book opens an infinity of future paths, not least relating to interior decoration, for example the convex-mirror image of Rossetti's Arnolfini four-poster bed (watercolour, around 1875, Wightwick Manor, National Trust). The book – and indeed the lectures on which it is based – provide a fascinating prequel to the National Gallery exhibition, Reflections: Van Eyck and the Pre-Raphaelites (until 2 April 2018); this is evidently the subject of the moment.

The Victorian public's response at the time was low on specifics: "Giorgionesque", "Botticellian", but Robert de la Sizeranne remarked of Burne-Jones: "From Botticelli, he took his type of female beauty" and traced his knights in armour to Mantegna. Looking to the past is much-misunderstood as nostalgia for lost innocence, but Prettejohn argues that "Victorian artists were, paradoxically, at their most original when they imitated the Old Masters most faithfully".

• Charlotte Gere is a writer, exhibition curator and 19th-century decorative arts specialist. She has authored many publications on jewellery, design and historic interiors, most recently *Artistic Circles: Design & Decoration in the Aesthetic Movement (2010)*, and *Jewellery in the Age of Queen Victoria, a Mirror to the World (2010, with Judy Rudoe)*. She is the winner of the 2011 William M.B. Berger Prize for British Art History

Never forget the class struggle

A study of exhibitions in Shanghai between 1949 and 1976 that aimed to harness culture to the Maoist revolution. By **Richard Kraus**

Curating Revolution: Politics on Display in Mao's China

Denise Ho

Cambridge University Press, 322pp, £79.99, \$99.99 (hb), £22.99, \$29.99 (pb)

REVOLUTIONARIES AND SOCIAL

scientists alike wonder about culture's role in ending revolutions. Denise Ho's Curating Revolution explores a narrowly focused but rewarding set of six exhibitions in Shanghai between 1949 and 1976. China's Maoist era is a rich vein for understanding how culture can harness the revolution, as Mao Zedong insisted that even after seizing power, the revolution would perish unless it continued in the realm of ideas and aesthetics. The Communists built new arts institutions, which increasingly behaved like a state instead of a revolution. Ho shows how this tension between revolutionary movement and state power co-existed uneasily within China's new institutions, as well as in the minds of citizens and cultural workers.

Ho argues that exhibitions (typically temporary, in contrast to permanent displays in museums) taught people how to participate in revolution. "Maoist exhibitionary culture called on the masses to listen and to speak, to remember and to weep, and to attack and to condemn," she writes. A national movement for "class education" spurred exhibitions to remind people of their bitter past. In Shanghai in 1965-66, a million visitors saw 926 objects and 21 scale models to remind working people of life's hardships before 1949. Tattered workers' clothing was juxtaposed with a pair of golden horses given to a mill owner for his 60th birthday. The Maoist theme, "never forget class struggle", guided curators much like "never again" inspires Holocaust museums.

Many visitors were moved to tears, but exhibitions did not always have their intended impact. Working people viewing examples of decadent bourgeois life sometimes simply gawked covetously at gold bars and fur coats as magical objects from the lifestyles of the privileged. The 1963 travelling exhibition with the theme "love science and eliminate superstition" was supposed to encourage children to think in a more modern way, but some kids thought fortune-telling exhibits were really cool.

Shanghai's class education exhibition moved visitors through in two hours, while other cities required seven. Shanghai's admirable concision required curatorial choices. As the Cultural Revolution heated up, radicals criticised the exhibition for neglecting feudalism and imperialism, and for having no worker or peasant curators.

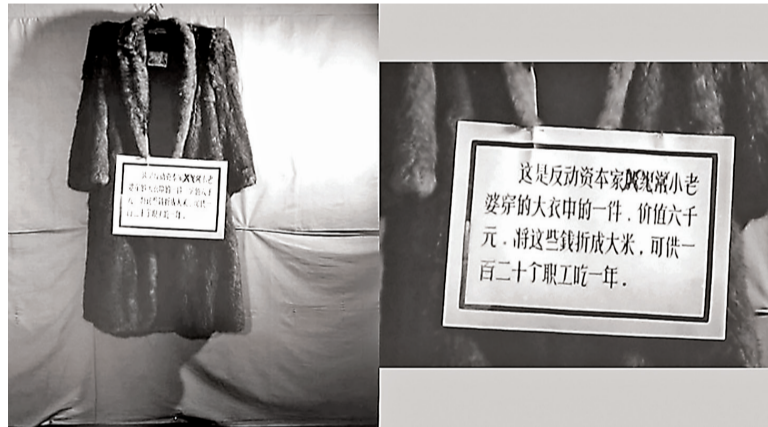
The most radical exhibitions, organised by Red Guards, displayed objects seized from the homes of former capitalists. Yes, China had red capitalists after the revolution, who received dividends from the state buyouts of their property in 1956. They lived well, if inconspicuously. But the state could no longer protect them when the Cultural Revolution began in 1966. Red Guards raided their homes looking for proof of counter-revolution. The Shanghai Exhibition of Red Guard Achievements displayed guns, gold bars, and a pillow case with a portrait of former president Chiang Kai-shek. When citizens feared the political consequences of accidentally marring an image of Chairman Mao, such items were regarded as prima facie evidence of counter-revolution.

Even as the Party used temporary exhibitions to promote revolutionary consciousness, it created permanent,

state-administered institutions. Shanghai Mayor Chen Yi, a cultivated revolutionary warrior, proposed making a museum of the site of the 1921 First Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. But no one was sure exactly where that meeting occurred. Complicated searches raised critical curatorial issues. Several of the 13 participants had abandoned the Party. Party founder Chen Duxiu became a Trotskyist. Another collaborated with the Japanese. The collaborator's widow was released from prison to help find the house. Once established, the museum wrestled with how to handle the ex-Communists, and how to treat Mao Zedong's minor role in 1921. Should the museum acknowledge two foreign Comintern advisers, the fact the memorialised Congress was not very important, or that its official date was off by three weeks? A politically astute staff constantly retuned the museum to match changing political winds. A popular monument to revolutionary martyrs in Nanjing maintained a workshop where relics such as eyeglasses and diaries were refurbished and sometimes manufactured. Ho does not indicate this happened in Shanghai.

Unlike the temporary exhibitions associated with political campaigns, the First Party Congress site had staying power. It still stands, its revolutionary message now overwhelmed by the gentrification of its neighbourhood, an upmarket shopping mall, handy to Harry Winston jewellers.

The Shanghai Museum has flourished, building its future success even during the greatest chaos. Like museums elsewhere, the Shanghai Museum cultivated donors. Their names could not be placed on galleries, but the museum could help their children with favourable job assignments



In the 1966 Exhibition of Red Guard Achievements in Shanghai, this fur coat was displayed as an example of capitalist exploitation and decadence. The placard reads: "This is one of the coats belonging to a concubine of the reactionary capitalist [name deleted]. Worth 6,000 yuan, this sum—converted to rice—could feed 120 workers for a year."

or university admissions. When the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, the museum set up a hotline for collectors who could seek the museum's protection when Red Guards raided their homes. The museum even dispatched staff dressed as Red Guards who explained to actual Red Guard raiders which objects were "cultural relics" (which Mao wanted protected) and not the "four olds" of feudal culture (which Mao denounced). The museum issued receipts. Many objects were (much) later returned, with grateful owners often donating choice objects to the museum. In Beijing, the Maoist public security chief and connoisseur Kang Sheng "borrowed" raided artefacts for his own home, but Ho does not indicate similar shenanigans in Shanghai. Because many anxious owners pre-emptively discarded objects to avoid criticism, the museum effectively searched through scrap metal and waste paper dumps to retrieve abandoned treasures.

Ho effectively describes life behind the scenes at the museum. Like Western museums, the Shanghai museum's staff was drawn from elite backgrounds, with only 15% from worker or peasant families.

Despite this political disadvantage in radical times, the museum's administration adroitly adapted responsively to the changing political climate.

Ho writes smoothly. Her extensive, impressive research draws upon Shanghai archives, interviews and film. Her tone is rather detached from the Maoist politics she examines, a welcome change after the impassioned battles of the Maoist years and their equally angry aftermath.

• Richard Kraus is the Emeritus Professor of Political Science of the University of Oregon, where he taught from 1982 to 2008. He lived and worked in China for several years and has studied the bond between Chinese politics and culture. Focusing on the political lives of works of art, he has written about the social functions of the art of calligraphy, nude painting, arts patronage and censorship, and China's drive to recover art objects plundered by Western imperialists. He is the author of *Brushes with Power: Modern Politics and the Chinese Art of Calligraphy* (1991), *The Party and the Art in China: the New Politics of Culture* (2004) and *The Cultural Revolution: a Very Short Introduction* (2012)