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Jonathan Shirland

Bridgewater State University, jonathan.shirland@bridgew.edu

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Review of 'Sculpture Victorious: Art in an Age of Invention, 1837–1901' at the Yale Center for British Art, 11 September to 30 November 2014

Jonathan Shirland

Stepping out of the elevator onto the second floor, the trio demand attention immediately, and thereby recalibrate our (stereotyped) relationship to Victorian sculpture at a stroke. They are impossible to ignore, or walk past. Yet they are a difficult grouping, with the darkly coloured, male, full-length statue of James Sherwood Westmacott's *Saher de Quincy, Earl of Winchester* of 1848–53 in uncertain relation to the two very different yet equally captivating busts of Victoria positioned to his left (*Fig. 1*). Francis Leggatt Chantrey's rendering from 1840 makes the nineteen-year-old queen sexy: the animated mouth and nostrils, bare neck and shoulders, and subtle folding of the tiara into the plaits of hair reinforcing an exemplary demonstration of the sensuality of marble. Yet, Alfred Gilbert's monumental three-foot bust made between 1887 and 1889 for the Army & Navy Club in London looms over the shoulder of Chantrey's young queen; the multiple textures, deep undercutting, and surface detail present an ageing Victoria at her most imposing. So what is Westmacott's piece doing here as an adjunct to this pairing of sculptural portraits? The curators were perhaps keen to show off the first of their many coups by immediately presenting to us a novel sculptural encounter: Westmacott's *Earl* is normally removed from close scrutiny, looking down on the chamber of the House of Lords from a niche twenty-five feet above the floor, alongside statues of seventeen other barons and prelates who in 1215 helped to secure the signing of the Magna Carta. As such, this first experience delivers one of the exhibition's primary concerns: to make our interaction with Victorian sculpture surprising again, and one of the techniques used to achieve this is through offering opportunities for close proximity while at the same time gesturing to the dizzying range of viewing spaces, contexts, and conditions in which Victorian sculpture experienced its unprecedented 'efflorescence'.¹ But another reason is because it is made of zinc electrotyped with copper, and thus the 'invention' of the exhibition's subtitle, and indeed the paradox of modernity and medievalism near the heart of Victorian art, are promptly realized (Droth, Edwards, and Hatt, p. 154).

¹ *Sculpture Victorious: Art in an Age of Invention, 1837–1901*, ed. by Martina Droth, Jason Edwards, and Michael Hatt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 15.



Fig. 1: ‘Sculpture Victorious: Art in an Age of Invention, 1837–1901’ exhibition at the Yale Center for British Art, on display 11 September to 30 November 2014. Image includes Alfred Gilbert, *Queen Victoria*, 1887–89, marble, on loan from Army & Navy Club, London; and James Sherwood Westmacott, produced by Elkington, Mason & Co., *Saher de Quincy, Earl of Winchester*, 1848–53, zinc electroplated with copper, with gilding, on loan from the House of Lords, London.

The surface of Westmacott’s figure, like many in the exhibition, is both intriguing and troubling with the detailing of chain mail impressive despite the sensation of proximity to a cheap substitute for bronze. Then one sees through the rectangular openings of Louis Kahn’s celebrated architectural design for the YCBA glimpses of Harry Bates’s *Pandora* on one side and Hiram Powers’s *Greek Slave* on the other, and the ambition of this exhibition starts to come into focus. Across 132 objects in the fairly modest physical space available on the second floor of the YCBA, ‘Sculpture Victorious’ strives to convey the sensation of national monuments, the scope and scale of the British Empire, ecclesiastical patronage, private residences, the House of Lords, and men’s clubs, alongside the recognition of the daily presence of sculptural imagery in everyone’s pockets. It is not just the ubiquity of Victorian sculpture that feels daunting; it is also the corollary sensation of sculptures as sites of very different types of daily, weekly, and annual rituals during Victoria’s reign.

As you enter this first bay more fully, another central theme of the exhibition — the technologies of reproduction that transformed Victorian

sculpture into a myriad of sizes, shapes, and materials — is enforced by the inclusion of Benjamin Cheverton's reduced, ivory version of Chantrey's bust. Once the process of its manufacture via the recently perfected reducing machine is registered, the pointing marks visible on Chantrey's 'original' seem more important, and the connection to Westmacott's *Earl* more profound. The cases of coins and medals to the right of the busts efficiently gesture to the scale of Victoria's image reproduction — the point being made that these objects should be construed as ubiquitous forms of relief sculpture — with examples from Hong Kong, Canada, Jamaica, Mauritius, and India jostling for attention. The range of media and techniques embraced by the exhibition — silver, fictile ivory, electrotype, bronze, alabaster, painted plaster, unglazed porcelain, copper, marble, majolica — is one of its great strengths, and is a consequence of its determination to productively complicate the relationship between the unique artisanal object and manufactured multiples. Clumsy art/industry dyads are neutralized and replaced by a more complex appreciation of the interplay and alliances between individual sculptors and commercial manufacturers. It is in this respect that the exhibition is more about objects than sculptors, even though some great Victorian practitioners are represented. The emphasis on reproduction and reproductive technologies has the surprising effect of bringing the actual makers of the objects and their relationships to the resistant surfaces back into view — the sites of production and manufacture. The stars of the show are Minton, Coalbrookdale, and Elkington as much as they are Chantrey and Gilbert, particularly at the YCBA because of the smaller number of 'blockbuster' pieces compared to Tate Britain's version. But I wish the curators had gone further in pushing this reorientation with even more photographs of studios and workshops and even more mining of trade manuals included in the displays. The inclusion of sample tools, raw materials, and an actual reduction machine would have enhanced this central concern of 'Sculpture Victorious' and helped to ensure that this valuable reminder that skill, material knowledge, and process are active agents even in the most commercial contexts does not over-romanticize the labour conditions most studio employees experienced.² Nevertheless, the elasticity of making, comprising so many different types of activity within the nexus of craft and industry, is wonderfully recovered by the exhibition and serves as a refreshing corrective to the more polemical voices of William Morris and Karl Marx that continue to dominate the historiography of the period.³

² The curators are careful to emphasize in the catalogue the range of studio conditions in which the makers of sculpture worked in the nineteenth century. See Droth, Edwards, and Hatt, pp. 18–29.

³ For a summary and a refutation of such narratives see Glen Adamson, *The Invention of Craft* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

The fact that this exhibition has been ten years in the making is reflected in its overly ambitious effort to address so many of the different ways in which sculpture has been productively reinterpreted by art historians since Benedict Read's defence of Victorian sculpture in the 1980s.⁴ The show benefits from the fact that three prominent figures in this re-evaluation — Martina Droth, Jason Edwards, and Michael Hatt — have shared curatorial duties and each of their voices is discernible for those familiar with their scholarly publications.⁵ Given its holistic approach to what counts as sculpture, vigorously striding across conventional boundary markers like display, material, and political significance, the exhibition is commendably coherent, but the decisions behind the inclusion of particular pieces over others are obscured somewhat by the extended periods of gestation from which the show has hatched, and are more reliant than other exhibitions on the weighty accompanying catalogue to justify the presentation of certain pieces when other landmark works are conspicuous by their absence. This sensation is perhaps more pronounced at the YCBA than at the Tate with works including Sir Frederic Leighton's *Athlete Wrestling with a Python*, John Bell's *Eagle Slayer*, and Sir William Hamo Thornycroft's *Teucer* only on display in London. There is also a tension in the exhibition's structure, since there is an implicit promise of a chronological survey of the best of Victorian sculpture, yet many big names are missing and the display at the YCBA is really built around a series of thematically driven case studies.

The second main room, in its examination of 'sculpture and national history', juxtaposes an amazing array of gaudy objects amid a kaleidoscopic trip through Victorian Britain — John Dando Sedding's *Pastoral Staff for the Bishop of St Asaph* from 1890, Edmund Cotterill's silver trophy commemorating the Eglinton Tournament from 1843, Paul Comolera's majolica *Peacock* produced by Minton and Co. from 1873 (*Fig. 2*), and an 1847 version of Hiram Powers's *Greek Slave* make for unexpected bedfellows. It is in this long but narrow space that the YCBA exhibition display deviates most conspicuously from the structured sections of the catalogue, with the examination of 'National Identity', 'Antiquity and the Ideal', and 'Craft and Manufacture' feeling rather too entangled with one another. But the ideological weight in this section is primarily put on the Great Exhibition in terms of the prominence of sculpture to it, and the curators propose that the aspiration to reproduce sculpture effectively and reach larger markets

⁴ See, in particular, Benedict Read, *Victorian Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

⁵ For example, see Martina Droth, 'The Ethics of Making: Craft and English Sculptural Aesthetics c. 1851–1900', *Journal of Design History*, 17 (2004), 221–35; Jason Edwards, *Alfred Gilbert's Aestheticism: Gilbert Amongst Whistler, Wilde, Leighton, Pater and Burne-Jones* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); and Michael Hatt, 'In Search of Lost Time: Greek Sculpture and Display in Late Nineteenth-Century England', *Art History*, 36 (2013), 768–93.



Fig. 2: Paul Comolera, Peacock, 1873, lead- and tin-glazed earthenware (majolica), The English Collection.

drove the development of a number of new inventions during this period, with the relationship between unique objects and manufactured multiples heralding an increase in quality and seriousness, not the reverse. All the pieces on display in this room point towards their own fascinating lines

of enquiry, but the visual highlight is the intimate juxtaposition of Bell's, Harriet Hosmer's, and Powers's enslaved female figures. The exhibition has to work hard to justify the place of the Hosmer and Powers statues in the history of Victorian sculpture given their fame and centrality to American sculptural historiography, but what a triumvirate they make in their beautiful circular arrangement.⁶ All of these works are much written about, of course, but the juxtaposition is not only politically provocative; it also encourages close comparison of colour, texture, surface treatment, and anatomical tension in these three now iconic figures.

However, the exhibition then takes us in a different direction through a detailed exploration of the diversity of iterations and depictions of the *Greek Slave* specifically in circulation in the nineteenth century. This focus enables Droth, Edwards, and Hatt to persuasively position the work as the anchor of the 1851 Great Exhibition, and to dramatize the reproducibility of sculpture in both two and three dimensions, and the range of types of looking encouraged as a result. Panoramic engravings, woodcuts, stereoscopes, chromolithographs, ambrotypes, calotypes, daguerreotypes, newspaper supplements, Parian ware, appliquéd coverlets, even sheet music to accompany the 'Greek Slave Waltz' convey the extraordinary appeal of Powers's work as an image more than as a material presence. These reproductions, each with attendant changes in scale, medium, and mode of viewing, dismantle the notion of copies as only 'about' an absent original. Each transcription is not simply a substitute for the other, but rather a distinctive and privileged experience in its own right. Indeed, the lack of natural light and the inclusion of two comfortable armchairs, sideboard, and stereoscopic viewer in this section of the display serve to remind us of the often private, interior nature of looking at sculpture in this period. This 'domestication' of the cornerstone of the Great Exhibition strongly promotes the interrelationship of photography and sculpture as central to the latter's nineteenth-century 'victory' and the transcriptive processes by which objects were and are absorbed culturally. By so doing, the exhibition pulls off something quite audacious: the necessary reliance upon photographs, illustrations, and statuettes that almost inevitably accompany transatlantic exhibitions of sculpture is transformed from a practical weakness into a persuasive conceptual strength.

Just as these revelations are sinking in, the exhibition transports us again, moving from the Great Exhibition, via the bourgeois Victorian home, to the Crystal Palace, and subsequently to the Victoria and Albert

⁶ For example, see Vivian M. Green, 'Hiram Powers's *Greek Slave*: Emblem of Freedom', *American Art Journal*, 14.4 (1982), 31–39; and Joy S. Kasson, 'Narratives of the Female Body: *The Greek Slave*', in *Reading American Art*, ed. by Marianne Doezema and Elizabeth Milroy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 163–90.

Museum, with only a subtle concrete divide in the wall and floor as a facilitator. Suddenly, one is looking down upon plaster cast copies from ecclesiastical buildings across Europe and the sensation of a symbolic repatriation of the bodies of English monarchs is enacted, particularly via the 1852–54 cast of the thirteenth-century tomb of Eleanor of Aquitaine from Fontevraud Abbey in France. Yet, surprisingly, a sense of intimacy is retained as a recurring refrain across often abrupt shifts in display context and reproductive media: copies of tombs are brought into close proximity in new spaces, statues from high up in the House of Lords are transported down to eye level, death masks add a frisson of personal closeness to otherwise distant national monument schemes, stereoscopic images of the ideal female sculptural nude can be revealed from behind a curtain. For me, this is one of the most unexpected and affecting lessons of the exhibition. The best example of the (false) immediacy and intimacy of encounter facilitated by new reproductive media is Elkington's 1873 copper electrotype of the famous monument to Queen Elizabeth I in Westminster Abbey, which is transformed in the exhibition from a marble tomb effigy into an upright portrait seemingly offering the disconcerting sensation of reciprocal eye contact with the viewer as the cushion almost becomes an extension of Elizabeth's dress. The exhibition benefits from the 'aura' that even mass-produced mechanical reproductions can carry once they are themselves over one hundred years old, and the relatively subdued lighting, ceiling height restrictions, and cramped physical spaces of the YCBA are a real advantage in this respect, and perhaps work to the objects' and images' benefit compared to the more spacious galleries of Tate Britain.

In comparison, the section explicitly devoted to the theme of 'Sculpture and Antiquity' is less compelling and feels more fragmentary. It is this bay that felt most impoverished compared to the version promised at Tate Britain, with Leighton's presence reduced to his 1880 self-portrait in front of a fragment of the Parthenon frieze, and works in the catalogue like John Gibson's *Hylas Surprised by the Naiades* of 1826–36 and *Tinted Venus* of 1851–56, and Raphael Monti's *Veiled Vestal* of 1847 much missed. But the citing of important works omitted from display is often the laziest of exhibition criticisms, and the cameos set into jewellery in this section, particularly *The Devonshire Parure* of 1856, are dazzling aesthetically as well as historically. This bay also serves as an effective splice between the first half of the show and the stunning works in the 'Craft and Art' section where the fluctuating and sometimes fraught relationship between art and manufacture is recast again with a new urgency towards the end of the nineteenth century and sculpture, the exhibition implies, becomes more restricted again to a narrow, elite market (Droth, Edwards, and Hatt, p. 28). This is reflected in the increased influence

of, and artists' participation in, advocacy groups like the Art Workers' Guild and the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society. Despite this shift, the exhibition doggedly resists the conventional compartmentalizing of Victorian sculpture, circumventing the 'New Sculpture' as a category to stress the continuities across the Victorian period, a position enhanced by the sense of constantly circulating objects and iconography, and an unrelenting stress on new materials and techniques of reproduction driving sculptural production forward.⁷

Another fascinating theme running throughout the exhibition is the relationship between painting and sculpture. The tensions in sculptural representations of painted originals is particularly strong in works like Mary Seton Watts's 1891 bronze triptych of panels that transform her husband's paintings *Love and Death*, *Death Crowning Innocence*, and *The Messenger* into varying levels of relief. Used for decades at the entrance of the cemetery of her Scottish family seat at Aldourie Castle, the wings of the angel in the central panel generate a particularly dramatic series of deeply cut lines and concentric voids, while the weathered patina evokes the murky green palette of the painted source. Edward Burne-Jones's *Perseus and the Graiae* is more extraordinary in its multimedia and multilevel scheme of silver and gold leaf, gesso, and oil on oak panel. Commissioned by Lord Arthur Balfour in 1875 to decorate a room in his London home, *Perseus and the Graiae* was intended to be part of a series of six oil paintings, punctuated by four wooden panels in gesso, and was exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1878 (Droth, Edwards, and Hatt, p. 390). The combination of gilded gesso relief, oil paint, and the prominent grain of the untreated wood creates a strange, indeterminate space between painting and sculpture, and is symptomatic of the surface oddness of many of the works in the exhibition. This troubling interplay is explored further in exhibits like the *Queen Victoria Brooch* by Paul-Victor Lebas and Félix Dafrique from 1851 which is based on an 1838 portrait by Thomas Sully, and in Edward William Wyon's reliefs based on Sir Thomas Lawrence's painted portrait *The Calmady Children* of 1823. These objects in some respects reverse the process of depicting sculptures in photography that the section devoted to the *Greek Slave* explored so compellingly. I wish a section of the exhibition was explicitly devoted to exploring this reciprocal exchange precisely because the relief reproductions in plaster, wax, and electrotype seem so odd; a new exhibition about the reciprocal translations of paintings into sculpture in the Victorian period would make a wonderful follow-up to 'Sculpture Victorious'. In these exchanges, there is a faint echo of the tremendous jolt generated by the 'actual' casket

⁷ For an explanation of the New Sculpture, see Susan Beattie, *The New Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

in Harry Bates's *Pandora* of 1890 and the attendant collapsing of distinctions between image world and 'real' world.⁸

The exhibition ends with, and is brought full circle by, William Reynolds-Stephens's *A Royal Game* of 1906–11 which plays off Westmacott's use of electrotyping in the first room and combines bronze, wood, stone, abalone, and glass. Presented to the National Gallery of British Art (now Tate Britain) by the Trustees of the Chantrey Bequest, this extraordinary work is an apt summation of the show in its fusion of categories — in this case Elizabethan tomb and equestrian statue — and balancing of historical nostalgia with modern technology. Indeed, it encapsulates the two most important dynamics the show confronts: it relates to the unifying principle of 'sculpture victorious' by persuasively demonstrating sculpture's ongoing ubiquity and importance, but it is a victory on what terms exactly? The sense of sculpture as image and idea as much as 'body double' and material thing is in compelling tension with the show's focus on objects on their own terms — their individual uniqueness and exploration of materials.⁹ The effect of this dialectic is like a hall of mirrors, and so the victory achieved is anything but an uncontested one. The sense of a fragile, self-conscious victory superseding the residues of Victorian self-confidence seems to me to be embedded in these disquieting surfaces, and is animated perhaps by the flawed attempt to unify class and taste inherent in the mission of much Victorian sculpture. Its efforts to harmonize and stabilize through shared and universally accepted moral ideas never feels secure, and seems vulnerable to the eruption of shifting class relations in Victorian Britain that both produced the victories celebrated in the sculptures and threatened to undermine them.¹⁰ This relates to the other most important dynamic generated by the exhibition: Victorian sculpture is made challenging, innovative, difficult, and modern again, but at the same time the experience of being with it remains strangely comforting, nostalgic, even conformist. This dialectic relates in some ways to the catalogue introduction's identification of the interplay in Victorian sculpture between timelessness and timeliness (Droth, Edwards, and Hatt, pp. 51–52). For all of the victories achieved by the show the nagging doubt contained in the question of whether the exhibition persuasively makes Victorian sculpture have a 'persisting present' or future alongside the concomitant sensation of a familiar but ultimately calcified sense of a 'great' Britain remains. Nonetheless it seems inconceivable that this monumental enterprise — a model of scholarly enquiry fused with

⁸ For an excellent analysis of this sculpture, see David J. Getsy, 'Privileging the Object of Sculpture: Actuality and Harry Bates's *Pandora* of 1890', *Art History*, 28 (2005), 74–95.

⁹ I mean to reference here David Getsy's influential argument in *Body Doubles: Sculpture in Britain 1877–1905* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

¹⁰ For a discussion of the relationship between class and taste in Victorian culture, see Droth, Edwards, and Hatt, pp. 41–42.

a celebration of actual material objects — should not be the catalyst for a range of new directions in the study of Victorian sculpture. Ultimately, it succeeds in making us ‘see’ Victorian sculpture again and achieves the disconcerting paradox of making the works seem both radical and nostalgic, strange and reassuring, modern and out of time, which is perhaps the most ‘Victorian’ thing of all about ‘Sculpture Victorious’.