

## Musée d'Orsay



### Beauty, Morals and Voluptuousness in the England of Oscar Wilde

#### In Search of a New Ideal of Beauty, 1860–1870



Thomas Armstrong  
*The Hay Field*  
© V&A Images

In Britain, in the mid-19th century, a cacophony of styles and theories shook the art world and the applied arts. However from this turmoil there emerged one clear and revolutionary idea: the search for a new ideal of beauty. The artists of the *Aesthetic Movement*, as it came to be known, sought nothing less than to create an art form freed from the established precepts of the Royal Academy, liberated from social conventions.

This was the arrival of "Art for Art's sake", an art that existed only in order to be beautiful. The images painted by the Aesthetes did not tell stories or preach sermons; their sculptures were visual, tactile delights, hinting at

sensual pleasures; their poetry aimed to be "pure".

The same spirit extended to engraving, bookbinding, fashion and photography, and above all influenced all forms of the decorative arts. The aim was to transform the banal and pretentious furnishings of middle-class Victorian homes by introducing furnishings worthy of the name "Art Furniture", by producing, ceramics, textiles, wallpapers and other objects of a quality that would grace the homes of the Aesthetes.



Edward William Godwin  
*Sideboard*  
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#### The Early Aesthetic Circles

The Movement was initially formed from two small, relatively homogenous groups who were intricately linked. The first, the Holland Park set, was focused around Little Holland House, the home of the Prinsep family, then one of the centres of artistic, literary and intellectual life in Victorian London. This was where Frederic Leighton and George Frederic Watts, its principle stars, encountered Tennyson, Julia Margaret Cameron and other famous figures.

The second group was focused, for a time at least, around romantic bohemians like Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his Pre-Raphaelite followers, including William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, rebellious figures like James McNeill Whistler, then just back from Paris and full of dangerous French ideas about modern painting, and the "Olympians",



Frederic Leighton  
*Pavonia*  
 © Christie's Images

painters of grand classical subjects, who were part of the circle of Leighton and Watts.

Choosing models such as Lizzie Siddal, Pre-Raphaelites' and Rossetti's red-headed muse, or Nanna Risi, Leighton's proud Italian beauty, neither of whom conformed to the genteel femininity favoured by the Victorians, the Aesthetic painters put forward a new vision of female beauty that embraced sensuality.

Finally, writers and critics, like Rossetti's brother William Michael and the young Algernon Swinburne, also gravitated towards this circle. Both attempted to describe the literary and artistic principles of Aestheticism, and sought to demonstrate the links between seemingly disparate works.

### 1870s onwards, Art for Art's Sake



James McNeill Whistler  
*Symphony in White, n°2: The Little White Girl*  
 © Tate, London, 2011

Led by Swinburne, the early artists of the *Aesthetic Movement* adopted the Parnassian theory of "Art for Art's sake". This formula was widely disseminated by Théophile Gautier in 1835 in the preface to his novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin*. According to this doctrine, art should free itself from all moral, utilitarian and religious constraints, and devote itself only to Art. This theoretical ideal of "Art for Art's sake" was later taken up by Oscar Wilde and James McNeill Whistler, and went on to attract wider public support for the cause of the *Aesthetic Movement*.

The peaceful revolution started ten years earlier, then extended into a revival of the decorative arts, thus opening a path that would lead, through a few leading creative artists like Godwin, Dresser, Morris and Whistler, to the present day concept of design.

They drew their inspiration from a variety of periods and distant places: the East, Greece, ancient Egypt and especially from Japanese prints. In fact, Japan had officially opened up to trade with the west in 1854 with the signing of the Kanagawa Treaty. The massive influx of Japanese objects that came onto the market from 1862 caused great excitement in Europe and the United States,

and would provide a reference for a whole series of original creative works that even today seem revolutionary.

These sources came not only from Classical styles but also from Islamic and Asian cultures that had become widely known thanks to the educational ideals of the recently opened South Kensington Museum, later to become the Victoria & Albert Museum.

Whistler, Leighton, Watts, Moore and Burne-Jones were moving at that time towards a new style of painting that favoured colour harmony over subject. Whistler's works *Nocturne* and *Symphony*, from this period bewildered certain sections of the public, confronted with an absence of painterly finish. The opening exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery was marked by some violent disputes between Whistler and Ruskin, with Ruskin championing an art based on truth to nature, encouraging exacting naturalistic detail, and stating that beauty could not be detached from moral and religious values.



Christopher Dresser  
*Diamond teapot*  
 © V&A Images

### The Grosvenor Gallery

In the early 1870s, a large section of the public still perceived the *Aesthetic Movement* to be a self-regarding and even immoral artistic elite. It was only later in the decade, with the growing support of enlightened patrons and a favourable critical response that the movement started to make more positive progress.

In 1877, the opening of the Grosvenor Gallery by Sir Coutts Lindsay to exhibit his

"aesthete" friends in an imposing and specially designed environment was still regarded as a bold move. Created specifically as an alternative to the Royal Academy's overcrowded Summer Exhibitions, the Grosvenor Gallery was designed in the style of the great painting galleries of private houses, and its opulently decorated rooms immediately became the most prominent place for these artists to exhibit.

For its first exhibition, the walls were hung with crimson silk. The following year this was replaced, at the request of



Sir Edward Burne-Jones  
*Laus Veneris*  
© Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums



Sir William Blake Richmond  
*Mrs Luke Ionides*  
© V&A Images

the artists, but at great expense, by a quite different "artistic" green. This would inspire Gilbert and Sullivan's famous expression, "greenery-yallery, Grosvenor Gallery".

Nonetheless, John Ruskin's vituperative diatribe against Whistler's paintings challenged the principle itself of "Art for Art's sake". The decade ended with the shadow of this controversy hanging over the Movement.

### Beautiful People and Aesthetic Houses. 1870-1890



Edward William Godwin ; Created by William Watt  
*Harmony in Yellow and Gold: The Butterfly Cabinet*  
© The Hunterian Museum & Art gallery, University of Glasgow 2011

The immense success of the Grosvenor Gallery heralded the emergence of a new artistic elite whose social prestige represented an unprecedented challenge to the Royal Academy. Aesthetic painting excited the enthusiasm of an intellectual and rich circle. As well as acquiring paintings and commissioning portraits, these devotees were keen to adopt the Movement's style for their interiors, and even the Aesthetic manner in their

dress.

Gradually, the great majority rallied to the movement. Aestheticism, initially the passion of the few, became the artistic and lifestyle choice of the many. The role of women became more important as a result of the introduction of art into the home and the change in conventional standards of female beauty that rejected the corset and adopted simple, loose flowing gowns in plain fabrics, with the garment expressing sophistication rather than luxury.

During this period, the emphasis in jewellery design too leaned towards expressing artistic qualities rather than financial value. Edward Burne-Jones, for example, designed several variations for his Bird brooch.

However the debate around the artistic and ethical values of this new art continued. Whistler, as ever, kept up his defence of the ideals of "Art for Art's sake", both in his writings and by staging his own exhibitions. There was in general however a growing feeling that the battle was won.



Brooch  
© V&A Images

### An Outstanding Example: The Peacock Room



Arthur Silver  
Peacock furnishing fabric  
© V&A Images

The Peacock Room was the most famous interior decoration of the Aesthetic Movement. Initially, this was a dining room in 49 Princes Gate, the London home of ship owner Frederick Leyland. One of the most astute collectors of the time, Leyland owned many remarkable paintings by the Aesthetes and the great masters, including Leighton's *The Syracusan Bride*

Originally, the walls were hung with antique gilt embossed leather, a decorative background for the blue and white porcelain so highly prized by the Aesthetes. Above the fireplace, Leyland hung the painting he had recently acquired from Whistler, *The Princess from the Land of*

Porcelain. Whistler suggested toning down some of the bright colours in the leather to harmonise with the work. Leyland agreed and left Whistler alone in the house.

During the summer of 1876, Whistler completely transformed the room, painting an array of golden peacocks, before showing people round and making it famous in the absence of his patron..

In 1908, the decoration was sold to Charles Freer, an American admirer of Whistler. Since 1923, the Freer Gallery in Washington has exhibited this symbol of the Aesthetic Movement, which summarises the Aesthetes' artistic boldness as well as their tastes and their lifestyle.

### Late-flowering. 1880-1900

In the 1880s, Britain was in the grip of a fad for Aesthetic "greenery-yallery", wittily satirised by Gilbert and Sullivan in their operetta *Patience* and by George Du Maurier's caricatures in *Punch*.

Towards the end of the 1880s and even into the 1890s, many great figures of the movement were still active. Morris continued to work with ferocious energy until his death in 1896. Burne-Jones, Leighton, Moore and Watts all continued to paint their increasingly dreamy visions in large-scale hieratic paintings. In addition, these now-famous men used their position and influence to encourage a young generation that sought to carry on the movement's many ideals.

Photography was now fully recognised as an artistic discipline, while sculpture was revitalised through the efforts of Alfred Gilbert, whose sensual works were at the origin of the English "New Sculpture". Regardless of medium, the Aesthetic artists sought subtle, and elegant effects.



Edward Burne-Jones  
*The Wheel of Fortune*

### Satire and popularity. Oscar Wilde, the Aesthetic Movement and satire

When the figure of the Aesthete first appeared in the 1870s, with his sensibility and passionate relationship with the arts, it came to be associated with "unhealthy", strange and possibly dangerous ideas. Some writings were denounced because, influenced by Baudelaire, they dwelled upon subjects of sensual love, lust and cruelty. It was claimed the Aesthete lacked "moral fibre" and was opposed to the values of Victorian society.

Nevertheless, in the 1880s, the long-haired, velvet-clad Aesthetes became the butt of a more amiable satire. They were ridiculed with extraordinary accuracy for what Gilbert et Sullivan called their *Angular and Flat* "stained glass attitudes", their overly precious discussions and their enthusiasm for "purple lilac", sunflowers, peacock feathers, blue and white porcelain and Japanese fans.

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), the leading self-appointed style guru, skilfully adopted the Aesthetic pose and achieved fame by giving lectures on the ideals of the Aesthetic Movement. His name and his image became so synonymous with the movement that his downfall in 1895 – he was sentenced to two years in prison for homosexuality after a very high profile trial – discredited the Aesthetic Movement for a whole generation.



Napoléon Sarony  
*Portrait of Oscar Wilde*  
© National Portrait Gallery,  
London

### The Twilight of the Aesthetic Movement



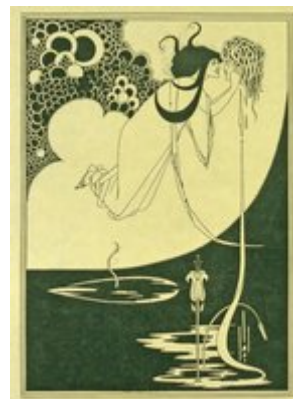
Maxwell Armfield  
*Faustine*  
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Some theories suggest that the exaggerations and affectations of its followers, disseminated by satire and parody, weakened the creative force of the Movement: painting and poetry lost their fervour, "artistic" furnishings were relegated to the suburbs... Beauty faded. Furthermore, in its later phase, Aestheticism was tainted through an association with decadence. Parallels were drawn between Aestheticism, homosexuality and Catholicism, still considered a threat by Protestant England, thus discrediting the Movement.

the *Aesthetic Movement*.

In the final decade of Queen Victoria's reign, the central ideas of the Movement were revisited with a sharper sensibility, replacing the figure of the "Aesthete" with that of the "Decadent". It was not, however, a lifeless expression of artistic theories heading for extinction, nor a puerile wish to defy artistic conventions and social

But although the deaths of Rossetti in 1882 and Godwin in 1886 deprived the movement of two of its most influential figures, London in the 1890s saw the emergence of a generation that shared many of the values of the early phases of



Aubrey Beardsley  
*The Climax : illustration for Oscar Wilde's Salomé*

propriety. This final period should be seen as the ultimate refinement, the final flowering of the artistic and intellectual response of the *Aesthetic Movement*.

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