The Greek body and the formalist quest across the divide: from Aestheticism to Bloomsbury painting

Chapter 7, Beyond the Victorian/ Modernist Divide: Remapping the Turn-of-the-Century Break in Literature, Culture and the Visual Arts, eds. Anne Besnault-Levita and Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada, New York, Routledge, 2018

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Vanessa Bell, *Spring*
Albert Moore
(1848-1893), *Azaleas*,
1867-68, oil on canvas,
197.9 x 100.2 cm, Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin
Sir Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898), Spring, 1869-70, gouache, private collection
For either all works of visual art have some common quality, or when we speak of “works of art” we gibber. Everyone speaks of “art,” making a mental classification by which he distinguishes the class “works of art” from all other classes. What is the justification of this classification? What is the quality common and peculiar to all members of this class? Whatever it be, no doubt it is often found in company with other qualities; but they are adventitious—it is essential. There must be some one quality without which a work of art cannot exist; possessing which, in the least degree, no work is altogether worthless. What is this quality? What quality is shared by all objects that provoke our aesthetic emotions? What quality is common to Sta. Sophia and the windows at Chartres, 3 Mexican sculpture, a Persian bowl, Chinese carpets, Giotto’s frescoes at Padua, and the masterpieces of Poussin, Piero della Francesca, and Cezanne? Only one answer seems possible—significant form. In each, lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions. These relations and combinations of lines and colours, these aesthetically moving forms, I call “Significant Form”; and “Significant Form” is the one quality common to all works of visual art.

Let us now see how the artist passes from the stage of merely gratifying our demand for sensuous order and variety to that where he arouses our emotions. I will call the various methods by which this is effected, the emotional elements of design.

The first element is that of the rhythm of the line with which the forms are delineated. Roger Fry, "An Essay in Aesthetics," [1909], *Vision and Design*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1920, 22.

[The Post-Impressionists] do not seek to imitate form, but to create form. [...] The logical extreme of such a method would undoubtedly be the attempt to give up all resemblance to natural form, and to create a purely abstract language of form – a visual music [...] Roger Fry, "An Essay in Aesthetics," [1909], *Vision and Design*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1920, 157.
The formalist terminology to which the [“Manet and the Post-Impressionists” exhibition of 1910 ] had given wide currency was perceptibly filtering into art criticism, including some commentators who had been first hostile to the exhibition, for example W.B. Richmond, who expressed his confidence about British painters who “strive to express the defor eper significance of things rather than produce a make-believe of plastic reality. They will search a new rhythm of line and colour, for a summary statement of the really essential features,” a terminology reminiscent of that used in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, where values as “linear design,” “abstract linear harmony,” and “rhythm” had been emphasized.

William Blake Richmond (1842-1921), *Electra at the Tomb of Agamemnon*, 1874, oil on canvas, 170.2 x 157.5 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Canada

Neither form nor colour in the abstract appeals directly to northern sensibilities when they are disengaged from episode; more sensitive to the charms of literature, wherein he finds some natural aptitude for expression, the average Englishman is puzzled, sometimes even irritated, by a work of Art that claims distinction, not on account of the story illustrated so much as by the opportunity it affords for translation into various shapes and colours. W.B. Richmond, “Lord Leighton and his art: a tribute”, *The Nineteenth century* vol. 39, March 1896, 465-76, 466; 468-9.
By degrees, however, my growing love for Form [...] led me more and more, to a class of subjects, or, more accurately, to a set of conditions, in which the supreme scope is left to pure artistic qualities [...] These conditions classic subjects afford, and as vehicles, therefore, of abstract form which is a thing not of one time but of all time, these subjects can never be obsolete, and though to many they are a dead letter, they can never be an anachronism. Frederic Leighton, letter quoted in J. Comyns Carr, Some Eminent Victorians: Personal Recollections in the World of Art and Letters, London Duckworth & Co. 1908, 98.
Albert Moore, *The Marble Seat*, 1864, oil on canvas, 47 x 74.6 cm, private collection

With [Moore] form goes for nearly everything, expression for next to nothing. He does not attempt realism [...], but paints in low keys of colour figure-subjects with little dramatic purpose, that seem prompted by an aesthetic turn radically akin to that of the Greeks. In [“The Marble Seat”], he achieves a perfection of design, a delicacy of decorative colour, a large grace and harmonious repose, that have hardly a parallel in modern art. Sidney Colvin, “English Painters and Painting in 1867”. *Fortnightly Review* n.s. 2, 1 October 1867, 464-76, 473.
Albert Moore (1848-1893), *Azaleas*, 1867-68, oil on canvas, 197.9 x 100.2 cm, Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin

Mr. Moore deliberately excludes from his art all representation of passion or sentiment, and seeks only to realize essential beauty of face or form undisturbed by dramatic feeling. [...] In order that painting thus restricted may not become trivial, the figures introduced into design must be of the severest type of beauty, the attitudes in which they are exhibited must have an abstract significance. There are certain natural movements and gestures which do not involve the expression of emotion, and which nevertheless serve to emphasize beauty of form; such, for instance, are the attitudes often chosen by Greek sculptors. [Anon.], “The Royal Academy (Third Notice)”, *The Pall Mall Gazette*, vol. XXII, May 19, 1875, 11-12.
J. M. Keynes' room in King's College decorated by Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, Webb's Court, King's College, Cambridge
Duncan Grant & Vanessa Bell, 8 studies for the murals at J. M Keynes’ rooms, 1920, oil on canvas, 83.8 x 35.5 cm, private collection
Edward Burne-Jones, *The Hours*, 1882, oil on canvas, 77.5 x 183.4 cm, Graves Art Gallery, Sheffield

[Burne-Jones] was content to suggest certain attributes by more abstract processes than those implied in the naturalistic use of oil-paint. Facial expression of a passing emotion he sought passionately but he sought it chiefly in line. [...] Colour, shape, the inclination of surfaces, relative depths of space or distance, he rendered by abstract patterns, and scarcely at all by the natural method of light and atmosphere. It is difficult to conventionalise even single objects for the purposes of decorative design, and Burne-Jones undertook the treatment of a whole world. R.A.M. Stevenson, “Rembrandt and Burne-Jones”, *Art Journal* n.s. 19, 1879, 57-8.
Moore was “Greek also in his choice of expressing himself greatly if not mainly by form, by accurate and delicate modelling,” adding that he was animated by a “purist’ ideal of art” and “preoccupied . . . with beautiful combinations of form and colour” Cosmo Monkhouse, “Albert Moore.” Magazine of Art vol. 8, Nov.-Oct. 1884-5, 191-6, 193-195.
Duncan Grant & Vanessa Bell, 8 studies for the murals at J. M Keynes’ rooms, 1920, oil on canvas, 83.8 x 35.5 cm, private collection
Bell, Vanessa (1879-1961) and Grant, Duncan (1885–1978), Arts and Sciences, a study made for murals at John Maynard Keynes' rooms, Webb's Court, King's College, Cambridge, 1920, oil on canvas, 83.8 x 35.5 cm
William Blake Richmond (1842-1921), Electra at the Tomb of Agamemnon, 1874, oil on canvas, 170.2 x 157.5 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Canada
Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, study for the murals, Keynes’s rooms

Burne-Jones, *Autum*, 1869-70, gouache and watercolour
Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, study for the murals, Keynes’s rooms

Albert Moore, *A Quartet, a Painter’s Tribute to Music*, 1868, oil on canvas, 61.8 x 88.7 cm, private collection (detail)
Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, study for the murals, Keynes’s rooms

Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation*, 1870-1876, detail
Edward Burne-Jones, *The Days of Creation*, 1870-1876, detail

*The Days of Creation* by this artist, six subjects in a common frame of ornamental design, certainly throws far into the shade most other works produced by English painters in which both the aim and the treatment are alike abstract and symbolic. W.M. Rossetti, “The Grosvenor Gallery”, *Academy* vol. 11, May 5, 1877, 396-7.

Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, study for the murals, Keynes’s rooms
Duncan Grant, mural in John Maynard Keynes rooms at Kings College Cambridge, recently uncovered under some wallpaper
Duncan Grant, *Dancers*, c.1910-11, oil paint on wood, 53.3 x 66 cm, Tate Britain
George Frederic Watts (1817-1904), The Judgment of Paris, 1872-4, oil on canvas, the Faringdon Collection, Buscot Park, Oxfordshire

The forms and the compositions of Mr. Watts are unusually so abstract and generic as to be removed far away from actual nature: and this constitutes their defect as well as their merit. [Anon., “The Royal Academy”, Art Journal n.s. vol. IX, June 1, 1870, 161-72, 164.]
G.F. Watts, *Study for Olympus on Ida*, 1872-79, oil on canvas, 64.77 x 53.34 cm, Watts Gallery

...the figure is treated with almost the abstract idealism of sculpture [...] with a difference, for [Watts] imparts to it a warmth and glow of colour to which the classic school of the last generation were total strangers. Heathcote H. Statham, “The Academy and the New Gallery”, *Fortnightly Review* 65, 59 ns, June 1896, 958-74, 964.
G.F. Watts, *Olympus on Ida (The Judgment of Paris)*, 1885, oil on canvas, 147 x 102 cm, private collection.

Duncan Grant, *Dancers*, c.1910-11, oil paint on wood, 53.3 x 66 cm, Tate Britain.
Sir Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898), *The Garden of the Hesperides*, c. 1870, watercolour and gouache on paper, 119 x 98 cm, Kunsthalle, Hamburg
John Roddam Spencer Stanhope (1829-1908), *Love and the Maiden*, 1877, tempera, gold paint and gold leaf on canvas, 86.4 x 50.8 cm, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco
Spencer Stanhope, *Love and the Maiden*, detail
Sir Edward John Poynter (1836-1919), *Horae Serenae*, 1896, oil on canvas, private collection
Edward Poynter, *Horae Serenae*, detail
Franz von Stück (German, 1863-1928), *Ringerlreihen*, 1910, oil on canvas, 71 x 70 cm, private collection
Duncan Grant, *Dancers*, c.1910-11, oil paint on wood, 53.3 x 66 cm, Tate Britain
Vanessa Bell, *Nude with Poppies*, 1916, oil on canvas, 23.5 x 42.5 cm, Swindon Museum and Art Gallery

Frederic Leighton, *Flaming June*, 1895, oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm, Museo de Art de Ponce, Puerto Rico

Duncan Grant, *Venus and Adonis* (1885-1978), c. 1919, oil on canvas, 63.5 x 94 cm, Tate Britain
Frederic Leighton, *Actaea, the Nymph of the Shore*, 1853-8, oil on canvas, 57.2 x 102.2 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

Another picture, ‘Actaea, the Nymph of the Shore’, ideal in form and romantic in motive, Mr. Leighton has culled from the Greeks. [...] In the picture before us, however, the nymph, in a state of nature, is seen simply at her ease safe upon the shore. The artist has made some effort to paint flesh in its freshness and transparency. [Anon.], “The Royal Academy”, *Art Journal* n.s. vol. VII, June 1, 1868, 101-10, 105.
Frederic Leighton, *Actaea, the Nymph of the Shore*, 1853-8, oil on canvas, 57.2 x 102.2 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

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