



Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-speaking world

7 | 2012

Ceramics / Submorphemics

Jacqueline Yallop, *Magpies, Squirrels & Thieves: How the Victorians Collected the World*

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/4605>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.4605

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Laurence Constanty-Roussillon, "Jacqueline Yallop, *Magpies, Squirrels & Thieves: How the Victorians Collected the World*", *Miranda* [Online], 7 | 2012, Online since 09 December 2012, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/4605> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.4605>

This text was automatically generated on 16 February 2021.



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Jacqueline Yallop, *Magpies, Squirrels & Thieves: How the Victorians Collected the World*, (London: Atlantic Books, 2011), 420 p, ISBN: 978 1 84354321

- 1 If you've never tracked down a ceramic pot of the Ming period that once belonged to a famous painter or experienced the thrill of rummaging through flea-market stalls just feeling that something might attract your desiring hand, beware: Jacqueline Yallop's latest book, *Magpies, Squirrels & Thieves: How the Victorians Collected the World* might just be an eye-opener and turn you into one of those relentless collectors depicted in this fascinating book.
- 2 As the author clearly states in the preface, the volume intends to show that "Victorian collecting had a character of its own" and contained a "robust and intrepid spirit of adventure" (1). More than a historical account of Victorian collecting, the book is a sweeping and masterful dive into the world of collectors. Steering away from classical accounts of collecting as a pathological mania such as Werner Muensterberger's famous *Collecting, an unruly passion* (1994), the book is both captivating and scholarly and will allow well-informed and more naïve readers alike to plunge into a world that feels by turns familiar and alien, exciting and somehow pathetic.
- 3 As one might expect, the first chapter firmly sets the Victorian scene by placing the action in bustling London. The focus is on the two major events that marked the century and displayed the collecting spirit of the period: first, the 1862 International Exhibition of Industry and Art; second, the opening of the new South Kensington Museum which opened its doors in 1857. According to the author, both events

exemplified the contrasting ways in which the public was drawn to appreciate the achievements of the age: whereas the International Exhibition covered “over 500 years of art production, and included all kinds of media, from painting, ceramic and glass, to metal, ivory and textiles” (10), the new museum allowed its large audience to get a glimpse of the beautiful and valuable objects one could acquire for one’s home.

- 4 Just like in the rest of Europe and especially in France where annual exhibitions had become tradition since the seventeenth century, “museums, galleries and governments were discussing what kind of art to collect, and how to show it” (23). As Yallop points out, “[w]hat made English collectors unique, however, was their taste for showing things off in their homes” (32). The collecting habit, which was first restricted to the upper classes, gradually spread to all the social classes and not only proved a private affair but a public practice too. In England as in the rest of Europe, many well-known voices (such as Ruskin’s) advocated the creation of more museums—especially in cities and towns outside London—to educate the general public. Behind the scenes and the displays of the larger institutions such as the British Museum or the South Kensington Museum, the community of private and collective collectors was growing and breaking new ground both at home and abroad.
- 5 The next five chapters of the book illustrate the dynamism and cosmopolitanism of this new kind of collector by tracing the itinerary of four male collectors and one female collector. The journey starts in London and goes on to encompass the whole world. Each chapter singles out one particular figure and deliberately associates him/her with a particular angle or type of collector from the professional connoisseur and art dealer to the passionate amateur. As each mini-epic develops, Yallop’s writing-style closely retraces the footsteps of the character type she describes, almost embracing their pace and mindset, thus allowing the reader to feel her characters’ singular passion.
- 6 Chapter 2 is devoted to John Charles Robinson’s career, from his early training days as a draughtsman in Paris to his many years as curator/librarian of the South Kensington Museum. In the tension between Henry Cole and Charles Robinson for the control of the museum’s acquisition and general collecting policy, Yallop convincingly demonstrates how Robinson and other contemporary collector-curators “were very much at the heart of things, forging a new vision for collecting that would last for generations” (96). By detailing the way in which Robinson’s collection evolved and featured in the museum, she manages to weave the collector’s personal history into the larger context of the development and practice of art history.
- 7 In the next chapter, Yallop carries her reader further on the crest of the collecting wave in a breath-taking European escapade in the company of the famous ceramic collector, Charlotte Schreiber. The whole section reads like a short-story and concludes on a comment that explains the fascination the famous collector has always attracted, especially to a feminist audience: “She challenged the conventions about how female collectors could act and what they could achieve. She took collecting out the drawing-rooms of her aristocratic heritage and on to the streets of a changing Europe” (186).
- 8 By contrast, Chapter 3, entitled “Pride, Passion and Loss: Collecting for Love”, throws light on a less romantic but no less engaging figure, Joseph Mayer, one of the first collectors of Wedgwood china and a fine collector of Egyptian antiquities. As Yallop details the collector’s passion for objects connected to the past, she reveals the more complex and fetishist aspects of the collecting mania. Picturing Mayer as he might have appeared to his uncharitable contemporaries and as what we would today call a

“loser”—“failing to marry, immersed ... instead in his collection” (247)—, she then cleverly balances out this portrait with that of the altruistic and perhaps misanthropic collector who ended up opening a public library in the small village he had settled in.

- 9 In the final two chapters, the reader’s insight into the Victorian collecting community is again furthered through the lively accounts of the life of the famous art dealer Murray Marks and the Chinese art expert, Stephen Wootton Bushell. While the chapter on Murray Marks rehearses some familiar scenes between the pre-Raphaelite painter, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, or the American-born James Whistler and J. Pierpont Morgan (a propos his famous Peacock room), the last chapter offers newer and fascinating evidence of the ways in which the Victorian collecting world was seen to integrate exotic Asian art to “unravel the mysteries of an unknown nation through its objects” (169).
- 10 This fascinating adventure through the land of collecting that takes us from fashionable London to the remotest areas of China is both a well-documented analysis of an artistic, social and psychological phenomenon and a real, thrilling page-turner full of suspense and unexpected *rebondissements*. As such, it is a remarkable and original contribution both to Victorian scholarship and to historical fiction in general and will be of great interest to all.

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Mots-clés: céramique, victorien, arts décoratifs, Pré-Raphaélites, collectionneur

Keywords: ceramics, Victorian, decorative arts, Pre-Raphaelitism, collecting

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