

‘VISUAL EDUCATION’ AS THE ALTERNATIVE MODE OF LEARNING AT THE CRYSTAL PALACE, SYDENHAM

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Abstract

The Crystal Palace at Sydenham, erected as a permanent cultural institution following the closure of the Great Exhibition of 1851, sought to bring direction to the long-standing inadequacies of pedagogy in existing state and philanthropic schools through the establishment of its own ‘national school’. The simple teaching method chosen by the Crystal Palace was ‘visual education’, which constituted a form of moral awakening through sight rather than words. This disciplined mode of looking associated solely with the sensual was directed towards working-class visitors in need of moral advancement and was completely separate from the rational mind. ‘Visual Education’ at the Crystal Palace was centred around the Fine Arts Courts, which were a series of model architectural buildings specifically designed to transform the complex historical theory of civilizations into a coherent visual illustration of the imperial history of nations. Thus the visual lessons of the Egyptian, Assyrian, Greek, Alhambra, Italian, and Pompeian Courts as well as others, were charged with moral enlightenment and rules of taste. In this article I argue that the conflicting and contradictory interpretations of the Fine Arts Courts in newspapers and periodicals exposed the inadequacies of a mode of learning focusing solely on the visual and that the tension between the moral lessons and the intellectual responses to ‘visual education’ were shaped by the complexities of existing class hierarchies. Thus, by looking at commentaries in the press, I will show that the aim of educated middle and upper class visitors was not to enter the ‘visual education’ of the Fine Arts Courts to acquire moral taste, but to mark their own social and intellectual advancement.

The Crystal Palace at Sydenham highlights the extent to which Victorian society was characterised by an alternative mode of learning which interconnected with the popularisation of an expanding visual culture but at the same time it also maintained its links with a form of learning that embraced the traditional classical ideal. In theory ‘visual education’ was a legitimate strategy for democratizing art, for making the manners, habits and customs of past civilizations, of other worlds, seem less strange but in practice the approach reinforced and intensified class divisions. To read the commentaries on the ‘visual education’ of the Fine Arts Courts at the Crystal Palace in the Victorian press is to see that, in fact, there were two competing kinds of educational visions. Most strikingly, there is a divide between the ‘visual education’ for less educated working class visitors, who were expected to engage with the artistic beauty of the Courts to conjure sensual and moral feelings. This form of pedagogy had firm links to the issue of working-class radicalism.¹ On the other side

¹ Anon., ‘The Opening of the Crystal Palace’, *Art Journal*, 6 (1854), pp. 214-15 (p. 215); A.P. Donajgradzki, ed., *Social Control in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London: Croom Helm, 1977),

there was ‘visual education’ for an audience presenting themselves as art connoisseurs in the pages of the press, who engaged with the Fine Arts Courts on a different level. By drawing on academic sources, and applying their intellectual understanding of the aesthetic rules of taste, critics were able to judge the historical and artistic precision of the Courts and in so doing the press became the primary mechanism for establishing the popular view that the Fine Arts Courts were condemned to inferior status when compared with the noble qualities of original antiquities. However, in a similar way to the Great Exhibition, which initially restricted entrance for the working man through costly admission prices, the Sydenham Crystal Palace was in no way designed to encourage attendance of the working classes who were likely to be working when the Palace was open.² As *The Times* aptly put it, ‘hitherto, nearly everything designed for the benefit of the multitude has, in some way or other, had its advantages absorbed by the classes immediately above them’.³ The restrictive opening times and high admission prices became a mechanism for managing the flow of working class visitors, which in turn strongly suggests that ‘visual education’ was really intended for a middle class grouping eager to shape their own specific forms of social and cultural authority.

At the close of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations in October 1851, after much deliberation and discussion, a group of entrepreneurs, some of whom had been involved in the organisation of the Great Exhibition, set up a private venture in order to save the unique iron and glass building from destruction. After securing £500,000 the Crystal Palace Company purchased the building from the contractors and set about transferring it from its temporary site in Hyde Park to the picturesque village of Sydenham in South London during the summer of 1852. The Crystal Palace at Sydenham was officially opened on 10 June 1854 in the presence of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. A nationalistic agenda was devised for a permanent Crystal Palace based on three fundamental objectives – ‘amusement and recreation, instruction and commercial utility’, which together formed a co-ordinated social policy strategy.⁴ This strategy of uniting education and entertainment was carried forward from the Great Exhibition, as a means of pacifying inter-class connections and elevating the minds of the working classes.⁵ In essence this meant that the educational and recreational programmes were purposefully designed with a view to generate profits for the shareholders and of course to sustain the building on an ongoing basis. The social mission which lay at the heart of the Crystal Palace’s

p. 23.

² Paul Gurney, ‘An Appropriated Space: The Great Exhibition, the Crystal Palace and the Working Class’, in *The Great Exhibition of 1851: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. by Louise Purbrick (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp. 114-45 (p. 119).

³ Anon., ‘The Crystal Palace’, *The Times* (24 July 1854), p. 9.

⁴ Anon., ‘The Crystal Palace’, *The Times* (12 June 1854), p. 9.

⁵ Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 62; Gurney, ‘An Appropriated Space’, p. 115.

existence was both serious and laudable, that is to teach the public the rudiments of good taste and design in order to improve the nation's commercial activities, and to ward off foreign competition in industry and commerce; and above all, to unite the British people in a programme of continuous improvement that served to elevate the character of the nation.⁶ But in a similar way to the Great Exhibition, where according to Thomas Richards, 'the era of spectacle had begun', the Crystal Palace Company turned almost every display into a spectacle or show at Sydenham to fulfil its social mission.⁷ As I will argue, rather than fusing recreation and instruction, the educational exhibits became categorised in the minds of visitors as peculiar articles of modern consumerism, a world apart from the remote cultures and craftsmanship of past civilizations they were designed to represent. This relates to the separate sphere of production and consumption, which Guy Debord referred to as a form of commodification and which he also termed 'spectacle'.⁸ Whilst the educational programme at Sydenham comprised both artistic and scientific displays, it was the former, as represented by the Fine Arts Courts, which formed the fundamental basis of the 'visual education' programme at the Crystal Palace.

Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins, who produced the geological illustrations of extinct animals at the Crystal Palace, first referred to the term 'visual education' during a lecture he delivered to the Society of Arts in May 1854. Hawkins attributed this intellectual awakening through sight rather than words to the eighteenth century Swiss pedagogue, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi.⁹ This method of learning was explored by Pestalozzi through practical experiments in schools, where he concluded that the most effective method for children to acquire knowledge was through the act of engaging the senses.¹⁰ This sensory approach to learning was largely untested in Britain, but it was regarded as especially suited to the working class because it was generally believed that it was part of the working class character to seek 'happiness in sensual gratification alone'.¹¹ In his address, Hawkins was optimistic of the intended value of 'visual education'. He said:

The whole of the great scheme now working to completion, known as the Crystal Palace, might be properly described as one vast and combined experiment of visual education; and I think it would be easy to show that its

⁶ Anon., 'The New Crystal Palace', *The Times* (6 August 1852), p. 5.

⁷ Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 3.

⁸ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1983), p. 15.

⁹ Waterhouse Hawkins, 'On Visual Education as Applied to Geology: With a Special Reference to the Geological Restorations at the Crystal Palace', *Journal of the Society of Arts*, 2 (19 May 1854), pp. 444-9.

¹⁰ Kate Silber, *Pestalozzi: The Man and His Work* (London: Routledge and Paul, 1965), p. 121.

¹¹ William Barry, *An Essay on the Most Desirable Place for Supplying and Elevating Recreation for the Working Classes* (London: published for the author, 1853), p. 6.

educational powers and design constitute its legitimate claims to the support of all civilised Europe.¹²

At the Crystal Palace the visual approach to learning took on universal significance, as Samuel Laing, Chairman of the Crystal Palace Company, announced at the planting of the first column at Sydenham in 1852, that ‘The tendency of the age was, not to appeal to the faculties by dry abstraction or words, but to appeal to the eye’.¹³ After all, the Directors of the Crystal Palace had witnessed the power of spectacle at the Great Exhibition, which had attracted an enthusiastic mass audience. Moreover, it was all too aware of the visual culture that was being embedded in society through the new pictorial magazines and newspapers such as the *Penny Magazine* (1832-45) and (though for a different readership), the *Illustrated London News* (1842-2003).¹⁴ Art spectatorship in particular, as Rachel Teukolosky argues, defined one’s appreciation of taste and culture and for this reason it became a matter of national pride and political urgency for all classes.¹⁵ Kate Flint, too, in her study of Victorian visual culture emphasises the widespread fascination with the act of seeing, reinforcing the extent to which the human eye became an object of knowledge and interest during the nineteenth century.¹⁶ As well as the focus on ‘visual education’ the Crystal Palace, itself a gigantic display case, took much pleasure in exhibiting in the Stationery Court the new technologies of vision, such as the camera and stereoscope, alongside the usual items of stationery – pens, paper, and envelopes – to reinforce the Crystal Palace’s tripartite role to provide education and entertainment as well as the much sought after shopping experience. This explicit linkage of cultural display with scientific and mechanical invention reinforces Jonathan Crary’s argument that optical devices in the nineteenth century should be regarded as ‘points of intersection where philosophical, scientific, and aesthetic discourses overlap with mechanical techniques, institutional requirements, and socioeconomic forces’.¹⁷ It is these apparatuses, he goes on to argue, that are the outcome of a complex reformulation of the observer ‘into something calculable and regularizable and of human vision into something measurable and thus exchangeable’.¹⁸ Thus at the

¹² Hawkins, ‘On Visual Education’, p. 444.

¹³ Anon., ‘The New Crystal Palace’, *The Times* (6 August 1852), p. 5.

¹⁴ The *Penny Magazine* ran weekly articles with the aim to teach art history to working class readers and also published Anna Jameson’s series of essays from 1843-45 on the biography of specific Renaissance painters and their major works.

¹⁵ Rachel Teukolosky, *The Literate Eye: Victorian Art Writing and Modernist Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 3, 17.

¹⁶ Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. xiv.

¹⁷ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), p. 8.

¹⁸ Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, p. 17.

Sydenham Crystal Palace, the optical devices on display, particularly the stereoscope, were fundamentally regarded as forms of mass entertainment but they also reminded visitors that such devices emerged from new empirical research on the physiological status of the individual, thus emphasising the dominant status of the observer in the acquisition of knowledge.

The Crystal Palace building and the glass display cases inside it can together be considered as optical devices to draw the eye to the exhibits and the articles for sale. This supports Rachel Bowlby's argument that the Crystal Palace and the Universal Exposition buildings in France closely resembled, in architecture, the more everyday 'Palaces of consumption' simply because they made use of glass and lighting to create spectacular visual effects to entice potential customers to their trade.¹⁹ Isobel Armstrong goes further in her analysis of urban glass buildings, arguing that '[t]he pellucid glass membrane [...] inevitably generated double meanings – the artificial lustre of consumer experience *and* urban pastoral, the spectacle as visual pleasure *and* reified commodity, economic exploitation *and* communal regeneration'.²⁰ Armstrong's argument is wholly applicable to the Crystal Palace at Sydenham. By placing the Fine Arts Courts, the Industrial Courts, and commercial stalls inside the glass building, the Crystal Palace Company created quite evidently, multiple meanings, alluding specifically to the tensions of being all and at the same time a trader, an educator and an entertainment provider. The *Athenaeum* in 1854 supported this mass educational mission: 'The age is growing, we hope, too wise for the tap-room, and needs a larger playground and different toys. In this great school-room we shall all be learners'.²¹ This statement promoted an educational system suited for all classes, which contrasted with the inequity and class segregation of existing educational provision.

'Visual Education' was introduced by the Crystal Palace Company as a feasible solution to the inadequacies of existing pedagogy. In taking into account the poor literacy levels amongst the lower classes and criticising the rote learning in existing state and philanthropic elementary schools, particularly the

¹⁹ Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 2.

²⁰ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 133. Emphasis in original.

²¹ Anon., 'The Sydenham Palace', *Athenaeum* (3 June 1854), p. 684.

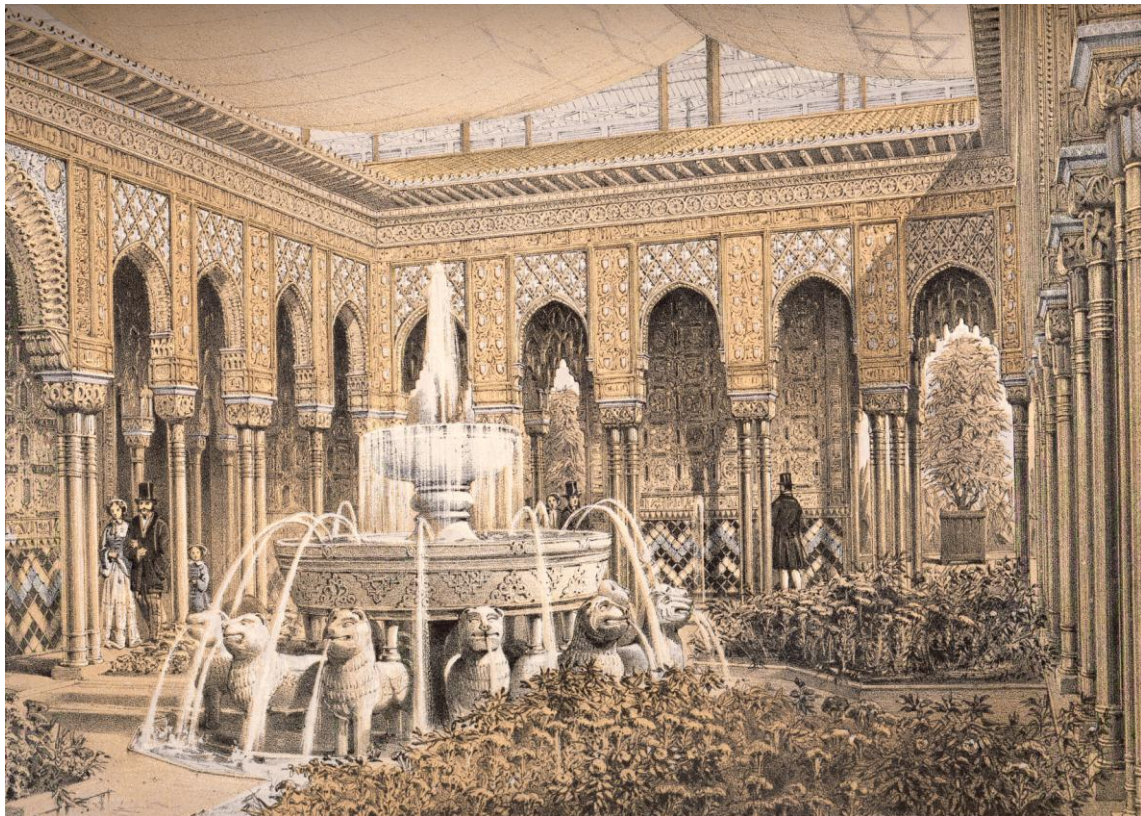


Figure 1 Court of Lions, Alhambra Court, Crystal Palace at Sydenham

Grandgrind-like lessons of facts, facts and more facts, which had dimmed the natural instinct of observation, the Crystal Palace Company was, in theory, planning to introduce a new era that would break with centuries of social segregation by proclaiming that the visual and sensual basis of its educational and recreational programmes were suited to all classes of people.²² It seemed to the *Art Journal* in 1856 that as the Fine Arts Courts were presented in a form so simple and attractive, they would bring popular appetite and elevated pleasure to all visitors who would be eager to profit from their examination.²³ The hope was that every class could be united at the Crystal Palace on equal terms through the ‘visual education’ of the Fine Arts Courts.

The primary role of ‘visual education’ was to impart high moral lessons to the masses specifically through the design and polychromatic effects of the monuments and artefacts on display. The Alhambra and the Pompeian Courts at the Crystal

²² See the literacy figures of the Registrar General in Michael Sanderson, *Education, Economic Change and Society in England 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 12; Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 166.

²³ Anon., ‘Ceramics Court at the Crystal Palace under the direction of T. Battam, Esq., F.S.A. The Opening of the Crystal Palace’, *Art Journal*, 2 (1856), p. 47.

Palace were both practical examples of the civilising influences derived from polychromy in art. The Alhambra Court was designed by the



Figure 2 Pompeian Court, Crystal Palace at Sydenham

architect and designer, Owen Jones, who visited the original Alhambra Palace in Granada in 1837 and took drawings and accurate casts of every ornament of importance. The interior of the Court of Lions, in the Alhambra Court, was literally covered from end to end with rich arabesque work, in coloured stucco, mainly in red, blue and gold. The *Spectator* in 1854 described the effects of the jewel-like colours of the Alhambra Court, as conjuring ‘a mystery full of repose for wearied eyes’ and Jones himself said that ‘[t]he eye, the intellect, and the affections are everywhere satisfied’.²⁴ The colouring of the Pompeian Court at the Crystal Palace, designed by the architect Matthew Digby Wyatt, was considered especially important for visitors’ moral instruction. The Pompeian Court was designed to the specifications of the House of the Tragic Poet in Pompeii, discovered in 1824; and as the *Illustrated Crystal Palace Gazette* explained in 1853, the gradations of colours found in the Pompeian Court, with the deepest at the base of the walls and lighter towards to the

²⁴ Anon., ‘The Alhambra Court of the Crystal Palace’, *Spectator* (26 August 1854), p. 912.

upper sections, produced an ‘agreeable sensation of harmony to the feelings as well as the eye’.²⁵

The colours of the Alhambra and Pompeian Courts were intended to naturally appeal to the sensibilities of visitors, to bring their manners to a state of calmness and equilibrium and convincing the mind that these were objects of a sacred or ethereal nature.

This one-to-one connection between the objects and their moral meaning however was not a matter of concern for critics and journalists. The Fine Arts Courts were largely examined in the press from an art historical perspective and the value of acquiring moral lessons through observation was considered almost second nature, as something that was inevitable by the very act of looking, as the *Builder* in 1855 put it: ‘A large number of visitors look up on its contents in a moral point of view, and regard it as having some ultimate bearing upon the character of the nation’.²⁶ Ruskin, on the other hand, made an impassioned appeal to examine works of art from a moral perspective which involved the right use of the eye going beyond ‘ordinary sight’ and seeing ‘within the temple of the heart’.²⁷ For this precise reason, Ruskin supported the educational mission of the Crystal Palace at Sydenham, where as he put it, ‘contemplation maybe consistent with rest, and instruction with enjoyment’.²⁸ The type of ‘visual education’ that was generally adopted by journalists and critics in examining the Fine Arts Courts involved the eye making a connection between the physical form of the object and the literature associated with it. Such application of structure, rigour and logic to the visual process emphasised a rational approach to learning. Critics implied that this form of engagement should take priority over the emotional and sensory approach to ‘visual education’ and as such it was a mode of learning reserved for the educated upper and middle classes who considered themselves exempt from any self-reflective moral learning.

The Crystal Palace Company issued no formal instruction or guidance on how to engage with the ‘visual education’ of the Fine Arts Courts. Visitors were left to their own devices when it came to engaging the eye and judging the courts by their moral content. This unscripted and unaided experience left visitors with the problem of interpreting what they saw. In her examination of visual culture Kate Flint has shown that the very act of seeing gave rise to questions of reliability of the human eye, pointing specifically to the fact that each individual contributes their own meaning to an object based on the cultural conventions and values of the individual.²⁹

²⁵ Anon., ‘The Pompeian House’, *Illustrated Crystal Palace Gazette*, 1(1853), p. 15.

²⁶ Walter Smith, ‘The Crystal Palace As An Educator’, *Builder* (15 December 1855), p. 612.

²⁷ John Ruskin, ‘Morning Thoughts at Geneva’, in *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vols. (London: George Allen, 1907), XXIX, pp. 574-7 (pp. 575-6). See also Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*, p. 174.

²⁸ John Ruskin, *The Opening of the Crystal Palace Considered in Some of its Relations to the Prospects of Art* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1854), pp. 1-21 (p. 4).

²⁹ Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*, pp. 1-2, 25.

For this precise reason the visual interpretation of the Fine Arts Courts themselves became a problematised category and open to conflicting interpretation. Another reason for the discord of views concerning the Fine Arts Courts at the Crystal Palace is that the Courts and their contents were casts of original monuments, sculpture, artefacts and



Figure 3 Aboo Simbel statues, Crystal Palace at Sydenham



Figure 4 Facade of the Assyrian Court, Crystal Palace at Sydenham mural decoration. The casts enabled the Directors of the Fine Arts Courts to employ very specific techniques to provoke a reaction from visitors. For instance, in the effort to popularise the ‘high art’ on display, the colours of many of the architectural and sculptural embellishment were deliberately overstated, which aroused scathing criticism in the press. In taking up this technique, many critics believed that the Directors had debased the high-minded principles of ‘visual education’. Lady Eastlake, in her role as arbiter of taste, complained that ‘under the high-sounding, but now even ridiculous name of Polychromy they have introduced an element which may be familiar to the sailor in his figure-head, to the mechanic in his tea-garden, and to the child of five years old in the picture book’.³⁰ This was especially evident in the two Egyptian seated colossi of Ramses taken from the ancient temple of Aboo Simbel in Nubia, which were reconstructed to the exact size of the originals – sixty feet high – and placed in the North Transept.

Lady Eastlake’s response to them was critical to the point of abusive: ‘that barbarity of colour has been superadded to barbarity of form’ she wrote, ‘and tanks to polychromy, what was simply grotesque is now unmitigatedly hideous’.³¹ For similar

³⁰ Elizabeth Eastlake, ‘The Crystal Palace’, *Quarterly Review*, 96 (December 1854 & March 1855), pp. 303-54 (p. 314).

³¹ Eastlake, ‘The Crystal Palace’, p. 314.

reasons, the colouring of the monuments in the Assyrian Court at the Crystal Palace received disapproval from the press. This Court was designed by the architect, James Fergusson, with the expert supervision of Austen Henry Layard whose discoveries on the banks of the Tigris in 1845 were to form the basis of the plan at Sydenham.

In comparing the original human headed winged bulls in the British Museum with the reconstructions that guard the entrance to the Assyrian Court at the Crystal Palace, there is a huge difference: there are no signs of colour on the originals whilst those at Sydenham were decorated with bodies of a brownish-red colour, beards were black, head-dresses white and their wings blue and yellow. Overall they had a theatrical look about them, arguably more fitting for a child's picture book or the stage set for a popular musical. The *Spectator* in 1854 made its views very clear: the ancient remains of Nineveh in the British Museum excited feelings of a higher order because they represented a kind of 'refinement and impassive vitality' whilst the copies at Sydenham were characterised by 'an aggressive unrepose' which produced 'a sense of oppression and discomfort'.³² According to the critic there was no way that these specimens of antiquity could be touched up for modern requirements with any satisfactory results.³³

The Crystal Palace Company should have been more open and transparent about the purpose of the Fine Arts Courts, which were not meant to function as substitutes for the authentic objects but as methods of making other civilizations – their art, their homes, their public buildings and everyday utensils – seem less strange and remote. For this reason the Company did not consider it essential to reconstitute a past with complete rigour, and scientific truth on the basis that as long as their arrangement within the Crystal Palace exemplified a continuous story of civilization, one that hung together and unfolded, they were fulfilling the fundamental requirements of 'visual education'. The Fine Arts Courts were laid out on two sides of the Crystal Palace. On the north east side of the building visitors would commence their education with the Egyptian Court, as the story of civilization began with the art of the pyramids, temples and tombs of the great Pharaohs. From the Egyptian Court, visitors would then move on to the Greek Court, with its more natural and realistic forms of architecture, sculpture and decorated pottery. Next in the arrangement was the Roman Court where visitors were introduced to models of the Pantheon, Forum and the Coliseum as well as the triumphal columns and arches of the emperors. The story of the ancients finished with the Alhambra Court. Then on the south-west side of the Crystal Palace, directly opposite these ancient Courts, visitors would resume their 'visual education' with the Byzantine Court. According to the *Hand Book*, the Byzantine Court took up this 'peculiar position' because it represented the transition from classical to gothic, with its emphasis on traditional sacred symbols, it was

³² Anon., 'The Assyrian Court of the Crystal Palace', *Spectator* (19 August 1854), p. 887.

³³ Anon., 'The Assyrian Court of the Crystal Palace', p. 887.

logically overtaken by the gothic as represented by the Mediaeval Court, then on to the Renaissance Court and ending the entire sequence with the Italian Court.³⁴

Critics and journalists considered the advantages and disadvantages of placing the Fine Arts Courts within a specific chronological narrative, and in short this attempt to distil the history of civilization was to many critics little short of an outrage. As one contemporary critic pointed out:

Why have we no sample of Mexican art? Why none of Chinese, Hindu, or Japanese? Why no Russian modifications of Byzantine? Why no mosque or mausoleum, in addition to the Alhambra Court? More than half of mankind are unrepresented.³⁵

The space of representation at the Crystal Palace was formed in the context of disciplinary knowledge, which reflected a particular ideological view. Mexican, Chinese, Hindu and Japanese civilizations were representatives of ‘alien’ cultures that did not fit into the ‘master narrative’ of Western imperial history.³⁶ The Assyrian and Pompeian Courts, which also formed part of the Crystal Palace’s educational programme, were placed outside the sequence for a very specific reason: the Crystal Palace Directors were able to emphasise Britain’s triumphant archaeological discoveries for visual contemplation and study, without complicating the ‘master narrative’ of historical progress. In other words the past of Assyria and Pompeii did not form part of the official history of civilizations, because experts were yet to agree that their history was worthy of preservation. According to the *Sydenham Crystal Palace Expositor* in 1854 the inaccuracy of the fixed arrangement had serious consequences for visitors. As it explained:

Even the most learned among us are still disputing about ancient dynasties and ancient races; nor do they agree about the chronology of empires that have disappeared. These matters are, and will remain, mysteries to the millions; and when the first emotions of wonder are satisfied by a view of the monuments of antiquity, they will cease to be attractive, because they will not be understood.³⁷

The *Builder* in 1855 reached a similar conclusion by pointing out that, once visitors with some textual knowledge had satisfied their curiosity, there would be no

³⁴ Matthew Digby Wyatt and John Burley Waring, *A Hand Book to the Byzantine Court* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1854), p. 7.

³⁵ Anon., *The Crystal Palace: An Essay Descriptive and Critical* (London: Walton and Maberly, 1854), p. 58.

³⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 24.

³⁷ Anon., *Sydenham Crystal Palace Expositor* (London: James S. Virtue, 1854), p. 6.

incentive to return to the Courts for a thorough examination because ‘the courts, as a whole [...] seem to have been placed where they are by mere accident’.³⁸ This forced the critic to conclude that ‘the arrangement of so many beautiful objects is managed so as to astonish rather than educate, perplex rather than define’.³⁹

Such responses to the Fine Arts Courts in the press are a sign of the lack of faith in a solely visual method of education. Critics and journalists were not the only ones who were confused. The observation made by the *Crystal Palace Herald* in 1854 proves that general visitors were unable to make associations with the Fine Arts Courts as it wrote, ‘on every side you will hear the popular voices exclaim, “It’s all very pretty, and must have cost a sight of money, and we should like it very well if we could understand it”’.⁴⁰ The Court which really captured the popular imagination and was understood by visitors was the Pompeian Court. The reason that visitors were able to associate with this Court was not so much that it contained magnificent examples of art, but that as a whole, it represented a familiar object – a house. The plan of the Pompeian Court in George Scharf’s handbook, entitled *The Pompeian Court*, made clear to its readers that the building was laid out to give an impression of a habitation of the time. The *Illustrated London News* in 1854 commented that it was ‘so real in appearance that one might almost fancy oneself in a home of our own day’.⁴¹ Some visitors would have associated with the Pompeian Court because they were familiar with William Gell’s book *Pompeiana* (1832), which focused extensively on the House of the Tragic Poet, and visitors acquainted with Edward Bulwer Lytton’s magical novel, *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) would also have recognised Lytton’s influence over the design of the Pompeian Court.⁴² As S.J. Hales rightly points out, these texts gave the Pompeian Court a useful contextual narrative but even if one had not made their acquaintance, visitors would have known the purpose and function of each room – atrium, peristyle, triclinium, cubicula and so forth – by the simple act of looking.⁴³ The Pompeian Court was aptly situated in the south transept, close to the Industrial Courts, where visitors could examine the style of each room and consider applying the luxurious design elements of this respectable classical dwelling to their own homes. Ready to turn the idea into a reality was the manufacturer, R. Horne, who just a stones-throw away in the Furniture Court, was

³⁸ Anon., ‘The Crystal Palace as an Educator’, *Builder* (3 November 1855), p. 526.

³⁹ Anon., ‘The Crystal Palace as an Educator’, p. 526.

⁴⁰ Anon., ‘The Crystal Palace’, *Crystal Palace Herald* (10 August 1854), p. 33.

⁴¹ Anon., ‘The Pompeian Court at the Crystal Palace’, *Illustrated London News* (20 January 1855), p. 62.

⁴² References to Edward Bulwer Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompeii* and William Gell’s *Pompeiana* are made throughout the handbook to *The Pompeian Court*. See George Scharf, *The Pompeian Court* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1854), pp. 23-73.

⁴³ Anon., *The Ten Chief Courts of the Sydenham Palace* (London: Routledge, 1854), p. 40; S.J. Hales, ‘Recasting Antiquity: Pompeii and the Crystal Palace’, *Arion*, 14 (2006), pp. 99-133 (p. 106).

selling 'Pompeian and other panelled decorations', making consumers believe that this other world could be recreated and was in a very real sense linked with their own.⁴⁴ The Furniture and Pompeian Courts enabled visitors to unite with considerable ease, the modern pursuit of 'consumerism' with the rudiments of 'culture'. This successful union of 'commerce' and 'culture' was in effect the essence of 'visual education', where remote past civilizations could be remoulded and traditional classical learning could be reformulated to meet modern requirements.

However, such shared visual references do not detract from the general difficulty and multiple ways of interpreting art through visual methods and for this reason, the Crystal Palace at Sydenham can be regarded as 'cultural battlefield', a term coined by Jeffrey Auerbach in his study of the Great Exhibition.⁴⁵ Auerbach argues that the displays at the Great Exhibition were purposefully selected and laid out to encourage visitors to consider an industrialized market society that promulgated notions of manufacturing innovation and artistic taste, as he puts it, 'a society built on both commerce and culture'.⁴⁶ However, despite the best efforts of the organisers, it became very clear that visitors had their own agendas and that in the end, the Great Exhibition became quite simply a commercial event.⁴⁷ Similarly, the Crystal Palace Company introduced 'visual education' at the Sydenham Crystal Palace in order to encourage visitors to think actively about the union of commerce and culture; but it soon became evident that this was never going to be achieved as visitors' reactions to the novelty of the Courts did not go hand-in-hand with the serious instruction in ancient and remote civilizations through observation of original artefacts and reading of authoritative texts.

In issuing handbooks to the Courts, the Crystal Palace Company admitted that it was difficult to obtain any kind of meaningful instruction by simply looking at the objects on display. The handbooks were intended to provide the essential context that brought the Courts and their contents to life. Indeed, Samuel Laing revealed that 'visual education' was intended to be a two-stage process: firstly to draw visitors' curiosity and interest through the senses; and secondly to develop their knowledge through reading. As he explained:

the veil once raised they [the visitors] will be disposed to extend their inquiries, and enlarge their spheres of knowledge by reading and criticism; and this is one of the educational forms under which the utility of the Crystal Palace may be demonstrated; for had not these objects been palpably represented to the

⁴⁴ Samuel Philips, *Guide to the Crystal Palace and Park* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1854), p. 167.

⁴⁵ Jeffrey A. Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 5.

⁴⁶ Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851*, pp. 94, 97.

⁴⁷ Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851*, pp. 108-9.

senses, they would have remained unknown to the millions who have neither the leisure nor the opportunity to pursue historical and scientific works, and who want a friendly guide to conduct them to the portals of the temple of knowledge.⁴⁸

The handbooks to the Crystal Palace were therefore intended to help visitors bring comprehensible order to the Courts. Whilst the authors of the handbooks – Samuel Philips, J.B Waring, Austen Henry Layard, George Scharf and others – were all dedicated and accomplished scholars in their own right, they did not fully appreciate the value of writing clearly and interestingly for a general audience. There are many examples in the handbooks and guides of passages made up of specialist language which would have failed to enlighten even the most avid reader, and Charles Dickens himself found them, as he put it, ‘a sufficiently flatulent botheration in themselves’.⁴⁹ In essence, the handbooks and guides failed to efficiently explain what to look at and how to look at it and to translate the visual into the verbal, which meant that the authors were assuming a certain amount of preconceived knowledge amongst their readers, one that prevented them from fully engaging their visual faculties.

The Fine Arts Courts failed to evoke any kind of passionate interest and their failure can, to a large extent, be attributed to the criticisms in the press. The blend of art historical accuracy and artistic fantasy disturbed many critics and consequently their reviews of the Fine Arts Courts failed to delight a public who expressed a greater desire to view original artefacts in their mutilated and ravaged state at the museums in and around London. Owen Jones in particular was utterly convinced of the value of his own artistic interpretations; this is particularly evident in his essay titled *An Apology for the Colouring of the Greek Court* (1854) which was bound and sold along with the other handbooks to the Courts. In his *Apology* Jones asserted that the colouring of the Parthenon frieze in the Greek Court had resulted from his profound and extended study of respected authorities, in particular the writings of G.H. Lewes, W. Watkiss Lloyd and Professor Gottfried Semper, also taking extracts from the Elgin Marbles committee of 1836 as well as extracts from the Institute of British Architects report of 1842.⁵⁰ Jones took a traditional academic stance in order to convince his readers of the value of his own artistic interpretations and the fact that he published his paper in the form of a handbook signifies that his approach and the debate surrounding it were not simply confined to academics and connoisseurs of art. But Jones’s *Apology* did not openly urge the public to look at the reconstructed Parthenon frieze and examine all sides of the argument. One can even go so far as to

⁴⁸ Anon., *Sydenham Crystal Palace Expositor*, p. 4.

⁴⁹ *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson, 12 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), VII, p. 370.

⁵⁰ Owen Jones, *Apology for the Colouring of the Greek Court* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1854), pp. 27-56.

say that Jones's *Apology* was no apology at all since he refused to acknowledge the inherent difficulties of depicting the mysteries of the ancient past. What emerges clearly from my examination of the Fine Arts Courts is that the representation of past civilizations, of other worlds, was deliberately contrived to compel visitors into a new way of seeing in order to awaken the desire for further inquiry. As Ruskin opined, 'how many intellects, once dormant, may be roused into activity [...] and how these noble results may go on multiplying and increasing and bearing fruit seventy times seven-fold, as the nation pursues its career'.⁵¹ But the handbooks and especially the countless responses to the Fine Arts Courts in the press revealed a very different approach to 'visual education', one that did not encourage the act of seeing but was instead focused for the most part on providing art historical interpretation to cultural worlds that one needed specialist knowledge to enter. For authors, journalists and critics alike, engagement with the handbooks and the objects on display were used to confirm the social class to which they belonged, or to which they strived to belong. Art criticism, as Teukolosky rightly argues, 'can be seen as both a product of and reaction against the new kinds of visual culture invented in the nineteenth century', which was, as we have seen, particularly evident at the Crystal Palace.⁵² In short, the authors of the handbooks and the art critics in the press paid no attention to teaching the public how to visually engage with the works of art on display but were instead concerned with reinforcing their own contributions to historical and contemporary debates. Thus on the one hand, 'visual education' served as a facile means of becoming acquainted with lost civilizations but on the other, the responses to the Fine Arts Courts in journals and newspapers exposed that 'visual education' at the Crystal Palace provided a false encounter with the past and this tension in itself became embedded in the wider conflict of competing class values. As a consequence of this tension, the Courts were, according to Lady Eastlake, 'simply a puzzle to the ignorant and a torture to the enlightened'.⁵³

⁵¹ John Ruskin, 'The Opening of the Crystal Palace', p. 4.

⁵² Teukolosky, *The Literate Eye*, p. 20. See Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*, pp. 179-80.

⁵³ Elizabeth Eastlake, 'The Crystal Palace', p. 311.

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