BOOK REVIEW

Modern Painters, Old Masters: The Art of Imitation from the Pre-Raphaelites to the First World War, by Elizabeth Prettejohn (London: Yale University Press, 2017). 288 pp. Hardback, £45.

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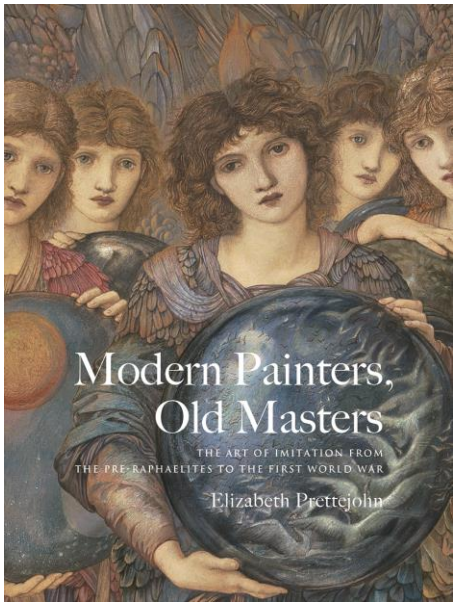

Visual allusion and the transhistorical relationship between works of art and their viewers form the subject of Elizabeth Prettejohn's illuminating study, *Modern Painters, Old Masters*. The author proposes that the much-maligned term 'imitation' most accurately describes the practice by which artists and viewers form relationships with their counterparts in other historical eras. The book argues that 'imitation' came in two distinguishing categories during the period from the 1848 founding of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood to the First World War: 'competitive imitation' (in which the artist attempts to transcend their predecessor) and 'generous imitation' (in which the artist faithfully copies the earlier model) (p. 15). In chapters on originality and imitation, on the influence of Jan van Eyck's *Portrait of (?) Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife* (1434), on the Pre-Raphaelites' discovery of early Renaissance painters, on Frederic Leighton's debts to Spanish painting, and on the tension between making art and looking at it, Prettejohn asks fourteen key questions. The formulation and clarity of these questions is explained by the origins of the book, namely Prettejohn's Paul Mellon Lectures given at the National Gallery in London and at the Yale Center for British Art in 2011.

Prettejohn's incisive questions stringently rebuff the notion that the significance of visual allusions, or references, is limited to identification. Instead, she probes issues of artistic intention, conscious and unconscious resemblance, and the import of context to allusion, and asks whether allusion might go beyond parody or derivation. The introduction also makes clear that documented historical proof is not necessary for Prettejohn's conception of visual allusion; for her, correspondence showing that Simeon Solomon had encountered and admired

Sandro Botticelli's *Madonna of the Magnificat* (*circa* 1483) prior to painting his visually similar *Toilette of a Roman Lady* (1869) is ancillary. What matters to Prettejohn is the aesthetic relationship, not the logical and provable ones. Her focus is on 'the discussion about whether there may be a relationship, and not in the assertion that there is one' (p. 14).

The sophistication of Prettejohn's arguments offers art historians an apparatus for approaching visual allusion comparable to that which literary scholars have developed for the study of intertextuality. By framing imitation as a form of visual argument, the author also convincingly argues that nineteenth-century painters like Dante Gabriel Rossetti dramatically expanded standards of taste and, thereby, the canon. Writing in fluid and accessible prose, Prettejohn continually upturns clichés and orthodoxies about her period's most familiar movement, Pre-Raphaelitism. For instance, in chapter three, the depth and quality of Rossetti, Millais, and Holman Hunt's knowledge of early Italian art is skillfully elaborated through an examination of their deployment of arched tops and predellas to harness and revivify the power of religious art for the artists' predominantly secular paintings. It is in this section that Walter Pater's conception of the 'House Beautiful' – in which 'the creative minds of all generations are always building together' (p. 177) – is introduced as the keystone for the collaborative historicist model put forward.[1]

In chapter four, Prettejohn takes Frederic Leighton's 1889 Royal Academy lecture on the art of Spain as a starting point for a discussion of nineteenth and twentieth-century imitations of Velazquez's *Las Meninas* (1656).[2] Weaving together paintings by John Singer Sargent, Lawrence Alma-Tadema, William Orpen, John Lavery, James McNeill Whistler, and Gustave Courbet, this chapter continually points to the artists' repetition of shadowy studio spaces populated by suggestive mirrors and identifiable artworks. Steering clear of the temptation to present a holistic theory that knits these varied works together, Prettejohn instead emphasises the richness of new meanings generated with the same pictorial means. This chapter makes strong claims about the implications of reconsidering Velazquez's 'influence'. Juxtaposing two portraits, one a fulsome and fleshly depiction of the young Miss Ruth Stewart Hodgson by Frederic Leighton, the other a feather-light sketch of Minnie Cunningham by Walter Sickert, the author shows how the study of Velazquez's reception might jolt 'us out of conventional narratives about the history of modern art' (p. 208).

Prettejohn hopes that *Modern Painters, Old Masters* may resonate far beyond scholars of Victorian art. She notes that her arguments will interest readers who believe that 'works of art (broadly defined) […] may communicate to eras and peoples not their own' (p. 4). As art historical interest in reception

[1] Walter H. Pater, 'Romanticism', in *Macmillan's Magazine*, 35 (November 1876), 64.
[2] Frederic Leighton, *Addresses Delivered to the Students of the Royal Academy: By the Late Lord Leighton* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1896), p. 219.

history and revivalism grows, this generously illustrated book will find a ready audience, eager to test its appealing arguments on the complexity and depth of visual imitation.

Bibliography

Leighton, Frederic, *Addresses Delivered to the Students of the Royal Academy: By the Late Lord Leighton* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1896).

Pater, Walter H., 'Romanticism', in *Macmillan's Magazine*, 35 (November 1876), 64.