

Is This Neo-Victorian? Planning an Exhibition on Nineteenth-Century Revivalism

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Abstract:

Neo-Victorian things are all around us but can these disparate objects, incorporating so many different points of reference, make a coherent exhibition within the museum environment? What does such an exhibition say about us and the Victorians – and why say it now? In September 2013, the Guildhall Art Gallery in London will tackle these questions with *Victoriana: The Art of Revival*, a show highlighting the work of artists and designers over the last twenty years who have been inspired by the nineteenth century. This article explores the challenges of curating an exhibition on the Neo-Victorian and reviews our relationship to contemporary material culture as channelled through the exhibition medium.

Keywords: exhibition, Guildhall Art Gallery, material culture, neo-Victorian, objects, retro-chic, steampunk, things, Victoriana.

Manicules pointing the way to cabinets of curiosity, Staffordshire dogs besmirched with ironic slogans, reworked cartes-de-visite and steampunk fobs, all self-consciously presented beneath the dusted down and spruced up hyper-world of a glass dome. Neo-Victorian things are all around us but can these disparate objects, incorporating so many different points of reference, make a coherent exhibition within the museum environment? What does such an exhibition say about us and the Victorians – and why say it now?

In September 2013, the Guildhall Art Gallery in London will tackle these questions with *Victoriana: The Art of Revival*, a show exploring the work of artists and designers over the last twenty years who have been inspired by the nineteenth century. The title of the exhibition takes its cue from Cora Kaplan's study *Victoriana* which, rather than defining the word, seeks to free it from "corner antique shop"-connotations. Instead, Kaplan offers the term as a "complementary miscellany of evocations and recyclings of the nineteenth century, a constellation of images which

[become] markers for particular moments of contemporary style and culture” (Kaplan 2007: 3).

Although neo-Victorianism forms a theoretical framework for the Guildhall project, it is the liberation of the term Victoriana that makes it appealing as a title for an exhibition that is more about enduring fascination punctuated by “markers”, than an easily identifiable movement. The idea for the exhibition crystallised some five years ago, more the result of consumer awareness than curatorial inspiration. From adverts to artisan goods, there appeared an increasing proliferation of Victorian inspired objects and images, converging strands of popular culture that had been bubbling away since at least the 1990s: steampunk, retro-chic, maximalism.

The inevitable time lapse between exhibition idea and realisation raises questions around the ability to capture the *Zeitgeist* in the public cultural sector. Nonetheless, the Guildhall Art Gallery presented the opportunity to bring ideas to fruition. In recent years, the Gallery has developed a reputation for staging shows on under-exposed Victorian artists (William Powell Frith, G. F. Watts, John Gilbert and John Atkinson Grimshaw). This established environment for the championing of the quirky, teamed with the need to broaden the Gallery’s exhibition remit to include aspects of contemporary art, suggested a focus on contemporary manifestations of the Victorian as a challenging but natural next step.

Victoriana: The Art of Revival, has been curated by the collections team at Guildhall Art Gallery with advice and inspiration from the contributors to the accompanying publication: *Victoriana: A Miscellany*, the title of which reflects the wide-reaching subject matter and includes works of fact, fiction and personal response from artists, writers and academics: Otto von Beach, Catherine Flood, Tom Gallant, Lee Jackson, Cora Kaplan, Tim Killick, Matt Lodder, Katty Pearce, Paul St George, Matthew Sweet, Sarah Waters and Gilda Williams. Artists represented in the exhibition have been selected for their conscious re-appropriation of the nineteenth century, regardless of whether their final creation appears immediately Victorian to our cliché hungry eyes. To achieve a good chronological spread over the last twenty years, many inclusions are by well-established artists and designers, sourced from public or private art collections. Other works are more recent responses – still awaiting their fate in the art market. Fewer works still have been commissioned for the exhibition to suit particularly challenging nooks and crannies in the Gallery’s original Victorian

Undercroft spaces, creating what the Guildhall team hope will be a sensory feast: light, sound, smell and even – in the case of two interactive objects – touch.

Nonetheless, there have been many ‘Is this neo-Victorian?’ quandaries in the process of object selection. There is neither a handy manifesto nor a connected group of artists championing a particular aesthetic; rather Victoriana is the crossroads at which many different paths of inspiration coincide to produce works that speak about our negotiation of old and new, about who we are and where we come from.

Arriving at even this flexible remit has been a long journey on a road of inspirational resurgence that is littered with the corpses and haunted by the ghosts of past revivals. Certainly, from the 1920s onwards, there have been several discernible revivals of Victorian style, from ironic Oxford students enthusiastically embracing the 1840s to 1960s psychedelic re-workings of art nouveau.¹ Contemporary artists inevitably view the Victorian period through this long lens, clouded by generations of reinterpretation. A neo-Victorian artwork can therefore be hard to distinguish and even harder to define. Some aspects of the Victorian aesthetic, such as the return, once again, of the mantelpiece as decorative focus in home furnishing and interior design, have become manifest as recent trends, losing their historical context. Similarly, materials and techniques that are originally Victorian, have arguably always since been part of the creative practitioner’s mode of reference – a process of continuation rather than revival. One might think of photography methods, such as platinum printing and photogravure, in this respect, or collage, kept alive throughout the twentieth century by artists such as Max Ernst and Peter Blake.

The potential pitfalls are obvious – an exhibition that throws a blanket theory over objects that were never supposed to be viewed through a neo-Victorian filter may end up as a mere conglomeration of unconnected visual markers. As such, the object creation timeframe has been kept tight for a manageable exploration of cultural threads. If the show explored how the last one hundred years have reworked the previous one hundred there would simply be too much aesthetic and theoretic ground to cover to offer a visually and ideologically meaningful object selection. The possibility of including comparative Victorian objects has also been considered and rejected as too prosaic and contrary to the spirit of the contemporary

artworks, many of which are often more about suggestion than direct inspiration and speak of dismissal as much as embrace. This is true of artists such as Yinka Shonibare and Phil Sayers, for instance, who exploit prevailing perceptions of an oppressive Victorian society to introduce questions of race and gender, at once reclaiming, and refuting, reviving and repulsing. The receding whiff of the cluttered Victorian parlour brings newness into starker contrast, highlighting what is ultimately still couched, by the artists at least, as a rejection of the past.

Indeed, even one of the most visually uncompromising examples in the neo-Victorian casebook – taxidermy – does not offer a simple narrative of revival. Taxidermy has flourished once again since 2005, with artists such as Polly Morgan and Tessa Farmer evoking wonder as well as revulsion.² Practitioners in this art have also led the way in the return of the now ubiquitous glass dome which, aside from concerns of protection and preservation, offers a visually powerful means of showcasing an object. These mini-vitrines, to be spotted in shop dressing as well as the middle-class living room, have become neo-Victorian super-tools enabling the individual to position themselves as collector/curator, combining wit with a simple signifier of retro-consciousness. The dome has also heralded the return of the object after decades in the minimalist wilderness. ‘Things’ are back.³ So far, so revivalist.

In June last year however, Morgan declared:

I get tired of the associations between taxidermy and Gothic or Victorian styles. I’m not remotely interested in viewing it in a dusty old antiques shop and why supposedly forward-thinking stylists turn up to photo shoots with lacy, ‘boho’ outfits to put me in I’ll never know. It’s a cliché, and my least favourite mode of dress. I love Modernist buildings, hi-tech gadgets and contemporary art. It’s this context I want to see taxidermy in, not through the grubby old nostalgic lens it’s usually peered at. (Morgan 2012: 3)

This emphasis on the modern puts the ‘neo’ into neo-Victorian with a vengeance, adopting a clearly anti-nostalgic stance. Nonetheless, artistic intention complicates the narrative by raising questions around the relevance of the past to contemporary creation. For some visitors also,

objects included in the exhibition will carry the ‘memory’ of display. For others, this might be the first time that they have thought about the Victorians in relation to what simply appears new and contemporary.

For Morgan, the relationship of her work to the Victorians is ambivalent, almost coincidental. It is less about them than us and less about historical legacy than the discipline of taxidermy itself. She has since moved on from the glass dome aesthetic to more organic and sculptural modes of open display. Similarly, Stephen Kenny, founder of *A Two Pipe Problem Letterpress*, an artisan graphics business, has recently abandoned his ‘drink more gin’-style to embrace a pared down and less historically encumbered look. He blames the more sentimental aspects of retro for the inevitable death of Victoriana as currently manifest in the popular contemporary imagination:

Different aspects of retroism, including the more accessible aesthetics of the Nineteenth Century, have now merged together to create a cup-cake culture. Most artists wish to distance themselves from twee, over-commercialisation. Victoriana will therefore be swept out with the same broom that clears away the ‘keep calm and carry on’ phenomenon. (Kenny 2003)

So, as Victoriana moves into the mainstream, becoming less of an eccentric retort to minimalism and more of a retail opportunity, why stage an exhibition about Victorian revivalism at all? Certainly, in cutting-edge fashion terms, the flurry of Victorian-inspired styles are probably on the crest of a hill looking at an imminent descent. Will an exhibition on this subject in 2013 expose the Guildhall Art Gallery as a Johnny-come-lately, cringingly trying to ride the trend but losing its footing in the attempt? Or is this the perfect moment to take a look at the moving of Victoriana from early incarnations to commodified exhaustion?

In museological terms, the gallery visitor with a sensitivity to the Victorian past has been well prepared. A series of neo-Victorian projects over the past decade have paved the way for *Victoriana: The Art of Revival* as a retrospective on a retrospective. Many of these projects have been works of neo-Victorianism in their own right, such as Grayson Perry’s *Charms of Lincolnshire Life* (2006), framed by the narrative of an unknown

artist – a mentally ill Victorian farmer’s wife driven insane by the loss of her children.⁴ In design terms, the *Medicine Man* Gallery at the Wellcome Collection (2007-present) heralded the return of the cabinet of curiosities aesthetic to museum display, exploiting the magic and mystique of the Victorian collector.⁵ Similarly *Spectres: When Fashion Turns Back* (2005), at the V&A, sought to capture the ghostly traces of inspiration by staging a series of seven fairground attractions that offered an immersive engagement with the fashion memory of contemporary dress. *Spectres* wasn’t just about the Victorian past, but suggested a fantasy, theatre-like impression of the nineteenth century, layered inextricably with the trace of other periods.⁶

Other exhibitions which have introduced the idea of revivalism include *The Secret Victorians: Contemporary Artists and a 19th-Century Vision* (1998), which sought to illuminate a ‘Victorian sensibility’ in works by twenty American and British artists,⁷ and, more recently, *Curious Pursuits*, an open call exhibition which staged the curator as impresario and presented the creations of up and coming artists working in the neo-Victorian style (2012).⁸ Specialist exhibitions which have sought to introduce a wider audience to the more niche aspects of Victorian revival have included *Steampunk* (2009-10) at the Museum of the History of Science, Oxford and *The Greatest Steampunk Exhibition in the World* (2011) at the Kew Bridge Steam Museum.⁹

The Guildhall exhibition will not be a work of neo-Victorianism per se, nor a *showcase* for contemporary artists, but a carefully edited look at the strongest aesthetic nineteenth-century survivals of the last twenty years – the things which, taking this opportunity to reflect on recent flirtations with the Victorians, have *best* defined what can be *best* termed a neo-Victorian aesthetic. Like Dan Hillier’s *Mother* (2006) with her underside of swirling tentacles (see below), which was one of the first images to be selected for the exhibition, *Victoriana: The Art of Revival* will consider the wide reach of nineteenth-century aesthetics from graphic novels to fine art photography and from the populist to the academic.



**Figure 1: Dan Hillier, *Mother* (2006),
altered engraving limited edition screenprint
© Dan Hillier, reproduced with kind permission of the artist.**

In many ways the exhibition is an experiment in movement making, nonetheless mindful of the dangers of an over-bearing curatorial voice. It remains to be seen whether, when brought together in the same room, these incongruous images and objects will speak to each other and their different potential audiences in meaningful ways. At the very least, the exhibition will offer a rich miscellany, celebrating those traces of the Victorian aesthetic that occasionally but perceptibly resurface within the contemporary consciousness.

***Victoriana: The Art of Revival* will run from 7 September to 8 December 2013 at the Guildhall Art Gallery, London, with an accompanying publication and programme of events: www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/visiting-the-city/attractions-museums-and-galleries/guildhall-art-gallery-and-roman-amphitheatre. The exhibition will be accompanied by a publication: *Victoriana: A Miscellany*, ed. by Sonia Solicari, (London: Guildhall Art Gallery, 2013).**

Notes

1. See Anthony Burton, 'The Revival of Interest in Victorian Decorative Art and the Victoria and Albert Museum', in Taylor and Woolff 2004: 121-137.
2. Morgan's work first came to public attention in exhibitions at *Bistrotheque*, London, *Zoo Art Fair* London, and Banksy's *Santa's Ghetto*, London, all in 2005.
3. See Asa Briggs, *Victorian Things*, 1988, which coincided with the Victorian antique revival of the 1980s and celebrated the object.
4. *The Charms of Lincolnshire Life*, ran at The Collection, Lincoln, from 7 July–2 August, 2006.
5. The *Medicine Man* Gallery, Wellcome Collection, London, designed by Hopkins architects, houses a permanent exhibition, displaying part of the vast private collection of Henry Solomon Wellcome (1853–1936).
6. *Spectres: When Fashion Turns Back*, ran at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, from 24 February–8 May 2005.
7. *Secret Victorians: Contemporary Artists and a 19th-Century Vision*, Hayward Touring Exhibition ran at a range of UK and US venues: The Minorities Art Gallery, Cochester, 17 October–5 December 1998; Arnolfini, Bristol, 12 December–31 January 1999; Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 10 February–4 April 1999; Middlesborough Art Gallery, Middlesborough, 1 May–26 June 1999; and Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, University of California, Los Angeles, 20 September 1999–2 January 2000.
8. *Curious Pursuits*, ran at the Portico Library and Gallery, Manchester, from 3–19 February, 2012.
9. *Steampunk*, ran at the Museum of the History of Science, Oxford, from 13 October 2009–21 February 2010, and *The Greatest Steampunk Exhibition*, took place at Kew Bridge Steam Museum, Kew, UK, from 4 June – 29 August 2011.

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