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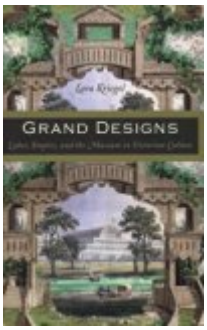

Lara Kriegel. *Grand Designs: Labor, Empire, and the Museum in Victorian Culture.* Radical Perspectives: Duke University Press, 2007. xviii + 304 pp. $23.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8223-4072-0.

Reviewed by Peter Stansky

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These are splendid days for the study of Victorian design, as evidenced by this excellent study as well as the recent prize-winning *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (2006) by Deborah Cohen. A somewhat more benign picture is emerging of the Victorian design scene. Its taste now seems less distant from ours. In related fields, similar questions have been treated by Jordanna Bailkin in *The Culture of Property* (2004) and Erika Rappaport in *Shopping for Pleasure* (2000). The standard received opinion had been premised on the ghastliness of Victorian taste. Through the work of the Arts and Crafts movement, and ultimately the triumph of modernism, we were rescued from those unfortunate times. This view was most famously put forward by Nikolaus Pevsner in his *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius* (1936, revised 1960). I was heavily influenced myself by Pevsner's interpretation in my *Redesigning the World: William Morris, the 1880s, and the Arts and Crafts* (1985). Kriegel generously cites my work although she is, in effect, quite effectively arguing against that older view of a break in taste. Revisionism has emphasized continuity, in part a function of the turn against modernism, and also that nineteenth-century taste was not as benighted as one might have thought. In a sense, Kriegel avoids the aesthetic question and thus in effect diminishes its importance. Rather, she has written a fine study of what was happening in the world of design in mid-century Britain. Though a powerfully argued text she provides a rich sense of how much was going on in the world of "commodity culture." Shaped, I think, by our present sense of the menaces of the corporate world, we have become increasingly aware of how many then too were, not surprisingly, out to make money.

This study's subtitle is misleading to some degree. Empire, other than some discussion of India both as a producer and as a consumer, is hardly touched upon. There is, however, a fascinating section on calicos and the cultural exchanges with India they represented. So too the relation with China figures in the text, part perhaps of the informal empire. There is a very perceptive discussion of the role of the laborer, and the tension about whether those involved in the production

of the objects were factory hands or artisans. While copyright was becoming a very significant factor in literary works, its role in matters of design was much more curtailed. Larger-scale enterprises fought its extension and those manufacturers who wished to exploit the market and the designs of others wrapped themselves in the rhetoric of free trade. The museum does play a central role in Kriegel's discussion, but in fact it is not the museum in general, as the title might imply, but rather the South Kensington Museum (now known as the Victoria and Albert) and its offshoots at Marlborough House and Bethnal Green. It is quite fascinating to read about the class issues involved and how rather suburban Brompton, where the museum was located, was raised in class status by being declared part of Kensington. At the same time, being so far to the west in London, it was a formidable trip for the poor from the East End. I was intrigued to discover that for a while the very grand collection, largely French and eighteenth century, of Sir Richard Wallace, now to be found in its own impressive museum in the West End, was originally located in Bethnal Green.

What Kriegel has done to great effect, which is radical in the sense it is new, but does not seem to me to be particularly politically so, is to recast the standard interpretation of the period. As has been the case for time out of mind, the Great Exhibition of 1851 plays a central role. She does not take issue with the interpretation of its importance as an indication that Britain had become the greatest commercial power in the world. She does discuss, as others have done, that even though the dominant note was that all was for the best, doubts were expressed through the existence of the Medieval Court. She quite properly pays attention to the development of the Schools of Design, founded so that British designers might have a chance to catch up with the French. There was the traditional disdain (combined with a very grudging acknowledgement of their stylistic superiority) for the French as foreign and feminine in contrast to the masculinity of John Bull. Design was a matter of national interest, indeed a matter of state.

Kriegel might have discussed at greater length the older view that so many of the British objects on display at the Exhibition, though more attractive to the eyes of the twenty-first century than they were for most of the twentieth century, were so extraordinarily ugly. And that the aim of so many of them, in their complicated designs, was to make it evident beyond a shadow of a doubt that much expensive labor had been devoted to their making and whoever owned one had had to spend a lot of money to acquire them. What the Arts and Crafts movement produced later in the century was not cheap, but in their attempted simplicity those objects were so much more attractive to those who shaped taste at the end of the nineteenth century and beyond.

Kriegel very interestingly complicates the story. If there is a central figure in her study it is Sir Henry Cole, so important, along with Prince Albert, for the Great Exhibition, and for the Schools of Design. He was also involved in a further enterprise, the Museum of Ornamental Art at Marlborough House, which has been heretofore comparatively neglected. Most interestingly, it contained a collection of bad design, the Gallery of False Principles, or Chamber of Horrors, collected for teaching purposes. This suggests that there was much more self-awareness about the defects of mid-Victorian taste than one might have thought. (The illustration of Sheffield ware reminds us of how ugly the objects could be.) Ironically, though, the room was extremely popular with the viewing public. Kriegel might have made more of the fact that Cole himself was an excellent and rather "proto-modern" designer. He was also proto "Arts and Crafts;" he might well have subscribed to William Morris's dictum "Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful" (***The Beauty of Life*** [1880]). Cole was a utilitarian and as such he was made

fun of by his friend Charles Dickens in his novel *Hard Times* (1854), not as the central figure Thomas Gradgrind, but as the school inspector. At the very beginning of the book he wants Girl no. 20, Sissy Jupe, ultimately the novel's heroine, to provide a utilitarian definition of a horse rather than a fanciful one. Kriegel makes clear that there was more continuity than one might have thought from utilitarianism to what followed in the modern movement. Although utilitarianism is heavily attacked in *Hard Times*, surely a utilitarian horse is preferable to one that might have been found on most nineteenth-century wallpapers. It is rather ironic that Duke University Press should use as the jacket for the paperback, although it does depict the Crystal Palace, a fussy wallpaper that was in fact displayed in the Gallery of False Principles. As the author points out nowadays, as with the Victorian public, this sort of design is quite popular with the viewing public. This fine study puts forward a persuasive argument that in the mid-century there was an intense concern with design that can tell us much about the social and cultural nature of that world. Design did matter, was taken seriously, and in terms of taste Victorian is not necessary a pejorative adjective.