



The Cult of Beauty: The Aesthetic Movement 1860-1900

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This spring, the V&A will present the most comprehensive exhibition ever staged on the Aesthetic Movement in Britain. Prizing the importance of art and the pleasure of beautiful things above all else, it was the first artistic movement to inspire an entire lifestyle.

The Cult of Beauty: The Aesthetic Movement 1860-1900 will gather for the first time many of the greatest masterpieces in painting together with sculpture, design, furniture and architecture as well as fashion and literature of the era. Aestheticism created an unprecedented public fascination in the lives of artists and the exhibition will explore the dazzling array of personalities in the group including William Morris, James McNeill Whistler, Frederic Leighton, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones and Oscar Wilde.

Aestheticism was a British movement born as a reaction to the art and ideas of the Victorian establishment. The exhibition will trace its development from the romantic bohemianism of a small avant-garde circle in the 1860s to a cultural phenomenon, concluding with the final Decadent phase at the end of the 19th century. The style was characterised by a widespread use of motifs such as the lily, the sunflower and the peacock feather, drawing on sources as diverse as Ancient Greek art and modern day Japan. It was at the V&A that scholars first identified and studied the movement.

Sir Mark Jones, Director of the V&A, said: *“Art as important for its own sake, beauty to be valued for itself alone – the ideas proposed by the Aesthetic movement are current again today. This exhibition, drawn from a wide range of public and private collections, will be the richest and most complete picture of this extraordinary movement yet.”*

The exhibition will include over 250 objects and is set out in four broadly chronological sections spanning the decades from 1860-1900: The Search for a New Beauty, Art for Art's Sake, Beautiful People and Aesthetic Houses, and Late Flowering Beauty.

The clear artistic ideal that emerged from the confusion of styles in the mid-19th century was the 'cult of beauty' that brought together the Pre-Raphaelite bohemians like Rossetti, maverick figures such as Whistler and the painters of grand, classical subjects like Leighton and G. F. Watts. These painters chose unconventional models like Elizabeth Siddal to create an entirely new type of beauty where mood, colour and harmony were more important than the subject.

The public became mesmerised by the extravagant dress and the homes or 'Palaces of Art' of figures like Leighton and Lawrence Alma-Tadema. The exquisite interiors and collections within these houses inspired aristocrats, intellectuals and entrepreneurs across the country to reproduce a similar style in their own homes. A number of set-pieces within the exhibition will evoke interiors of the day such as the celebrated Grosvenor Gallery exhibition, Whistler's Peacock Room and Rossetti's bedroom in artistic Chelsea. Fashionable dress, accessories and jewellery will be shown in relation to portraits of key figures in the movement.

The style permeated all areas of life and many leading manufacturers of furniture, ceramics, metalwork, wallpaper and textiles such as Liberty's of London capitalised on public interest by commissioning prominent designers including Walter Crane and Christopher Dresser. Coinciding with the growth in domestic markets in industrial Britain, the resulting designed products were among the first that were widely accessible to an aspiring middle class, transforming the furnishing and decoration of the home.

Oscar Wilde was the original celebrity style guru and he played a crucial role in promoting the idea of beauty in the home. As the Aesthetic movement entered its heyday, it was affectionately satirised in Gilbert and Sullivan's opera *Patience* and in the pages of *Punch*.

The Cult of Beauty: The Aesthetic Movement 1860-1900 has been organised in collaboration with the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. After London, it will travel to the Musée D'Orsay in Paris in September 2011 before travelling to the de Young Museum (part of the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco), opening in February 2012.

Notes to Editors

Cult of Beauty: The Aesthetic Movement 1860-1900 is curated by Stephen Calloway at the V&A and Dr Lynn Federle Orr at The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. The exhibition is being designed at the V&A by OPERA.

Ticket Information

Tickets: £10 (concessions available).

For advance bookings visit www.vam.ac.uk (booking fee applies).

Exhibition Sponsors – Bank of America Merrill Lynch

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Exhibition Publication

The Cult of Beauty: The Aesthetic Movement 1860–1900 (Stephen Calloway & Lynn Federle Orr, eds) will be published to accompany the exhibition. It will include essays by Elizabeth Prettejohn, Penny Sparke and Christopher Breward. For press information about the book contact Julie Chan on 020 7942 2701 or email j.chan@vam.ac.uk.

Exhibition Merchandise

There will be a V&A Shop range inspired by the Aesthetic period including silks, ceramics, glass, and jewellery. For press information on merchandise accompanying the exhibition contact Samantha Safer on 020 7942 2878 or email s.safer@vam.ac.uk.

For further PRESS information about the exhibition please contact Zoë Franklin or Elinor Hughes in the V&A press office on 020 7942 2497 / 2500 or email z.franklin@vam.ac.uk / e.hughes@vam.ac.uk

A selection of press images are available to download from pressimages.vam.ac.uk

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