

FACING THE LATE VICTORIANS

Portraits of Writers & Artists from the Mark Samuels Lasner Collection

At the Grolier Club: 21st February ~ 26th April 2008



Exhibition Review, with Picture Gallery For *The Victorian Society In America* (Spring 2008)

By Maureen E. Mulvihill

Princeton Research Forum, Princeton, New Jersey



James McNeill Whistler (1834 ~ 1903). Ink, 1890

By Sydney Starr (1857-1925) and James McNeill Whistler

A collaborative portrait, begun by Starr and completed by Whistler

Note Whistler's famous 'butterfly' signature



Facing The Late Victorians: Portraits of Writers and Artists from the Mark Samuels Lasner Collection

Curated by Margaret D. Stetz. At the Grolier Club, 21st February through 26th April 2008.

47 East 60th Street, New York, New York 10022. Telephone 212-838-6690.

Lecture on the exhibition by Mark Samuels Lecture & Margaret D. Stetz. 1st April 2008. 6PM. Free to the Public.

For Dr Stetz's monograph on the exhibition subject, see details below, with image.

Consumer tastes in Victorian England shifted dramatically from print to image. While the finely produced book was still cherished by collectors, scholars, librarians, and the Common Reader, the late-Victorian public sought a closer look at its celebrity writers and artists. Meeting the demands

of an eagerly buying public, the visual arts market responded swiftly in a variety of commodified formats. Since most devotees enjoyed but a quick glance at their cultural heroes or heroines, it was for painters, illustrators, and also photographers to take up the task. As Hogarth famously wrote in *The Analysis of Beauty* (London, 1753), it is the image which reveals the very character of a subject. And so the visual arts market, responding to changing tastes, became heavy with images in all media. Victorian faces were everywhere: on canvases, in prints, in photographs, in woodcuts, in books, in magazines and newspapers, and in amusing caricatures and cartoons. The visual arts in late 19th-century England had wisely distanced itself from the iconomania of its predecessors (Van Dyck, Reynolds, *et al.*): students of the Victorian face hoped to capture character within the gaze. Documenting this historical shift in a nation's material culture is the chief achievement of *Facing The Late Victorians: Portraits Of Writers And Artists From The Mark Samuels Lasner Collection*, currently on show at New York City's Grolier Club until 26th April.

Mark Samuels Lasner, a distinguished specialist on 19th-century book history, is the collector behind the show; he has been building his collection of Victorian rarities for some 30 years. His collection (some 7000 items) of first editions, presentation copies, authors' correspondence, and works of art and design, is on loan to the University of Delaware Library, where it may be viewed by appointment. Speaking of his collecting habits to this reviewer, he had this to say: "I began collecting portraits of the writers of the books in my library and then things got of hand — and I found I was acquiring portraits for portraits' sake. My aim has been to gather images of a cross-section of figures — major and minor — but also to represent the various forms in which images of writers and artists contributed to the rise of Victorian celebrity culture. Thus there are drawings for both public and private consumption, prints, sketches in letters and manuscripts, caricatures, photographs, and reproductions in all manner of print media." **Margaret D. Stetz**, who curated the show (and several others prior to this), selected some 80 pieces from the Samuels Lasner collection; the show she assembled corresponds to her 2007 monograph, *Facing The Victorians* (she recently has prepared a 16-page Supplement of images and commentary on additional portraits in the exhibition). Mr Samuels Lasner and Dr Stetz will be speaking about their show on April 1st at the Grolier Club, 6PM. (See notes below for further information.)

Strolling through the main floor Exhibition Hall of Manhattan's distinguished Grolier Club — a large exhibition space, whose alcove is nearly 18' high — visitors come face-to-face with Victorian faces in 10 large display cases (the largest of these, approximately 48" high x 103" wide, wall-to-wall) and one freestanding flat case or vitrine (28" wide x 98" long x 5" deep). One sees, for example, British **painters** (Sir Edward Burne-Jones, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Singer Sargent, Walter Sickert, James McNeill Whistler), British **poets** (Matthew Arnold, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, Alice Meynell, Alfred Lord Tennyson, William Butler Yeats, A E Housman, A C Swinburne), **novelists** (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Henry James, Sir James M. Barrie, Thomas Hardy, George Meredith, Rudyard Kipling, Robert Louis Stevenson, H G Wells), essayists (John Ruskin, Arthur Symons, Walter Pater); **playwrights** (George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde), **actors & actresses** (Sir Henry Irving, Dame Ellen Terry), and **illustrators** (Aubrey Beardsley, Max Beerbohm, Henry Furniss, Kate Greenaway, George Du Maurier, Sir William Rothenstein), and **William Morris**, the genius figure of the Victorian era, whose gifts in design, printing, and writing strain all categories. **Pseudonymous women writers**, an enticing subject in recent feminist research, is valuably represented in this show, with images of four literary women whose public writings displayed masculine names: Katherine Bradley & Edith Cooper (an aunt-and-niece lesbian couple) wrote as "Michael Field"; Mary C. D. Bright wrote as "George Egerton"; and Mary Ann Evans wrote as "George Eliot." The creators of these many images is a Who's Who in the visual arts of 19th-century Britain: James McNeill Whistler, Aubrey Beardsley, Sir Max Beerbohm, Sir Edward Burne-Jones, Kate Greenaway, Augustus John, George Du Maurier,

Joseph Pennell, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Sir William Rothenstein, Walter Sickert, *et al.* Late-Victorian **portrait photographers and studios** in the show include Herbert R. Barraud, Walter Biggar Blaikie, Elliott & Fry (London), Frederick Hollyer, J. Russell & Sons (London), Van der Weyde Light Studio (London), *et al.*

Not all of the Victorian faces in this show are English faces. The culture of late-Victorian England was richly multicultural. We often forget that the Victorians attracted high-profile talent well beyond their scepter'd isle. From **Ireland**, came Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, William Butler Yeats, *et al.*; from **America**, came that connoisseur of Victorian female beauty: the society portraitist James McNeill Whistler; and from **France**, came Lucien Pissaro, printer and book-illustrator, whose exotic dark looks and broad talent were an exciting new asset to the Victorians. One is reminded in this show that the artistic and literary achievement of Victorian England resulted from the work of a rather smallish group of hard-driving careerists (many of them linked in various ways), who saw London as an enticing hub of opportunity. Two figures in the show, incidentally, have received recent attention. First, **Wilfrid Scawen Blunt** (1840-1922), poet, diarist, traveler, and expressed enemy of the British Empire. Blunt's photograph, mounted in one of his volumes of poetry inscribed to Augusta (Persse), Lady Gregory, is displayed in the show. Blunt will doubtless be a new topic in literary chat owing to the recent reissue of **Elizabeth Longford's** biography of Blunt, *A Pilgrimage of Passion* (1979, 2007). Likewise **Walter Sickert** (1860-1942), whose striking self-portrait (ink-&-wash on buff paper, 1897) is among these many faces. Visitors to the show are likely to pause over this curious image in light of Patricia Cornwell's sensational case for Sickert as 'Jack the Ripper' (*Portrait of a Killer*, 2002), a hotly-contested attribution whose smoking gun is the presence of the unusual Sickert-family watermark on a piece of Ripper correspondence held by Scotland Yard.

Installation and assemblage, so critical to any exhibition, are masterfully served in this show by its curator, Margaret Stetz. Her capable assistants included **Jesse Rossa**, Senior Assistant Librarian, University of Delaware, as well as **Megan Smith, Maev Brennan, Mark Tomasko, Mary Young**, and others, at the Grolier Club. Dr Stetz's organization and sequencing of some 80 exhibits — these are her selections from the Samuels Lasner Collection — achieves what **James Johnson Sweeney** (Director, 1945-1946, Painting & Sculpture, Museum of Modern Art, NY; Director, 1952-1959, Guggenheim Museum, NY) calls "creative installation" and "the relations of things." What Sweeney wrote on the subject in 1967 still holds: "The problems of ... exhibition presentation are very closely related to those of designing a book. In a sense, the only major difference is that the visitor actually moves through the exhibition and becomes part of the installation, while the book always remains an object apart. But each speaks primarily to the senses of the observer, and each in the end, to have its effect, must be assimilated or digested intellectually" (Sweeney, *Vision And Image: A Way of Seeing* [1967, 1968], Chapter X: p 129; Brooklyn Museum of Art Library & Archives copy).

Speaking at the show's opening, 20th February 2008, Dr Stetz offered useful information about her curatorial role and also about celebrity representation in Victorian England: "Although this exhibition has the effect of highlighting some of the riches of the Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, my job as curator was not to create a showcase, but a show. Exhibitions are also narratives: they need to tell stories. They do so through the interplay of the objects themselves and the labels that interpret them. Here, I felt there was a good story to tell about the rise of what we know today as celebrity culture, which in late-Victorian Britain began with portraiture, a phenomenon embraced and enhanced by what was called the 'New Journalism.' Accustomed as we are to figures from the entertainment world as celebrities, it might be surprising to see writers and visual artists getting the celebrity treatment or to find the notion of 'genius' presented with the care now afforded to 'glamour.' But here are images of a variety of professional writers and

artists, male and female, who have been drawn, painted, or photographed in ways that will seem very familiar. The late Victorians were inventing the conventions of representation we take for granted in the modern media."

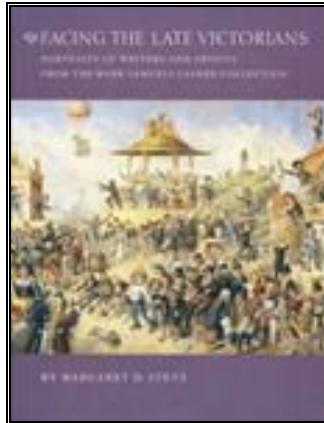
And in that spirit, the show tempts and seduces the viewer: one is moved along through the exhibition by the sheer delight, creativity, and variety within the many display cases. In any one case, for example, there are exhibits in multimedia formats; one sees a woodcut, then a photograph, then a rare book, then a manuscript note. The variety of media within any one display case promptly engages the viewer. Further, there is little sensory overload owing to the uncrowded arrangement of the exhibits; the spacing of the objects is generous, lending a relaxed and comfortable look and 'feel' to the displays. This sort of visual access matters, so that visitors to the show do not leave exhausted — often the case in large exhibitions. Now and again in the display cases, we see these Victorian faces facing one another, enjoying (as it were) a nod, a chat, a smirk — more clever planning from Dr Stetz. The exhibit labels, also critical in any show, are impressively detailed. All essential information is noted: provenance history, relevant dates, the medium of the object, all the germane identifications, and especially the value and uniqueness of the piece. Dr Stetz wrote many fine labels for this show, and hats off to Megan Smith and Maev Brennan at the Grolier Club who constructed them with obvious attention to fonts, type size, leading, and formatting.

For writers and researchers casting about for a new subject, may their steps lead to the Grolier Club, where this show offers such attractive topics as Victorian fashion and costuming, late-19th-century photography, book production & book illustration of the era, satiric images (caricature & cartoons), styles of Victorian self-representation, Victorian children's literature, the Victorian 'New Woman,' and the topical *flâneur* / *flâneuse* culture of 19th-century London.

Acknowledgements: The author takes pleasure in thanking Mark Samuels Lasner for access to selected digital images in his collection and for various information; she is also grateful to the following individuals for assistance with particulars: Margaret D. Stetz; Megan Smith (Grolier Club); and at the Brooklyn Museum of Art Archives & Library, for access to material on James Johnson Sweeney and exhibition installation, Carol Olson, Deirdre Lawrence, and Angie Park. Finally, Kenneth E. Olin, Editor, *The Victorian Society in America e-Newsletter*, and the Society's Business Manager, managed the publication of this essay with every courtesy.



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Accompanying the Exhibition:

Facing The Late Victorians: Portraits of Writers and Artists From The Mark Samuels Lasner Collection.

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Picture Gallery

Selected Images from Grolier's Victorian Show (Spring 2008)



Walter Sickert (1860-1942), Artist & Journalist. Self-Portrait

Ink and wash on buff paper [1897]

Originally a protégé of Whistler, Sickert distinguished himself as an influential figurative painter:

“There are few British figurative painters whose development can be adequately discussed without reference to Sickert The fascination his work holds for painters continues unabated”

(Wendy Baron, “Sickert,” *Oxford DNB* 2004). Sickert has recently become a hot subject of controversy among devotees of serial killers.



“Had Shakespeare asked me ...” by Sir Max Beerbohm (1872-1956)

Pencil, Ink, and Watercolor [1896]

Frank Harris, Irish-American journalist and all-around rogue, had expressed outrage over the Oscar Wilde sodomy scandal, asserting that genius such as Wilde’s and Shakespeare’s had its own entitlements. Seizing the moment, Beerbohm caricatured Harris offering a plump bum to the Bard.



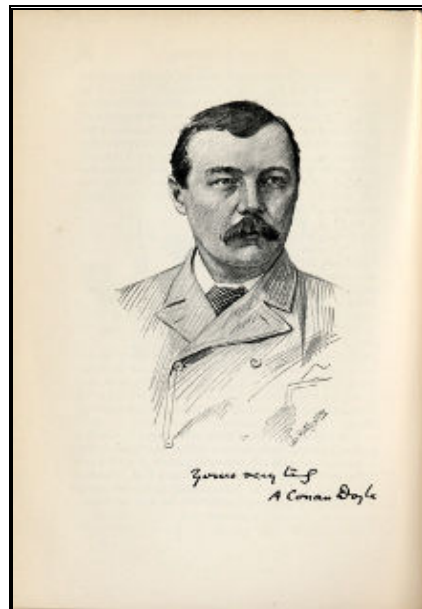
Dame Ellen Terry as Olivia. Pencil, 1878

By Violet Manners (*née* Lindsay), Duchess of Rutland (1856-1937)

Ellen Terry (1847-1928) found fame as Olivia, in a sentimental comedy written for her by W G Wills.



Jane Morris (1840-1914), Embroiderer, Binding Designer, Artist's Model
By Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882). Pencil, 1870
Jane Morris was the muse of the Pre-Raphaelite circle, wife of William Morris,
and a mistress of Rossetti, inspiring his work for some 20 years.



Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, M.D. (1859-1930), Novelist & Short Story Writer
Illustration [1892] by Sydney Cowell (fl. 1884-1907) & George Hutchinson (fl. 1881-1892)
In J K Jerome, *My First Book: The Experiences of ... A. Conan Doyle ...* London, 1894
Imagine Victorian literature without Doyle's stories of Sherlock Holmes, Professor Moriarty,
and the Baker Street Irregulars ... impossible! In 2007, Sherlockians welcomed two new books
on Doyle: *A Life In Letters* by Jon Lellenberg *et al.* and *The Man Who Created Sherlock Holmes*
by Andrew Lycett.





Mark Samuels Lasner is Senior Research Fellow, University of Delaware Library. A graduate of Connecticut College, he is the author of *William Allingham: A Bibliographical Study* (1993), *A Selective Checklist of the Published Work of Aubrey Beardsley* (1995), *The Yellow Book: A Checklist and Index* (1998), *A Bibliography of Enoch Soames* (1999), *The Bookplates of Aubrey Beardsley* (2008), as well as two co-authored volumes, *England in the 1880s: Old Guard and Avant-Garde* (1989) and *England in the 1890s: Literary Publishing at the Bodley Head* (1990). His articles and notes have appeared in the *Book Collector*, *Browning Institute Studies*, *Notes and Queries*, etc. He has organized or co-curated exhibitions at the University of Virginia Library, Georgetown University Library, the Houghton Library and the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Bryn Mawr College Library, and the Grolier Club. In February 2004, he co-organized "'Michael Field' and Their World," an international scholarly symposium (University of Delaware); also in 2004, he was principal local facilitator for "Picture This: The Art and Technique of Illustration" (28th annual conference, American Printing History Association, University of Delaware Library). Active in numerous bibliophilic and bibliographical organizations, Mr Samuels Lasner was the 2003 recipient of the Sir Thomas More Medal (University of San Francisco), honoring the spirit of "private collecting, a public benefit." The Mark Samuels Lasner Collection (some 7000 items: printed books, mss., letters, graphics, ephemera) is associated with the Special Collections Department, University of Delaware Library, but is privately owned. Housed in the Morris Library, the Collection focuses on British literature and art, 1850 to 1900, with particular strengths in the Pre-Raphaelites, and in writers and illustrators of the 1890s. Access by appointment only. Telephone 302.831.3250; marks@udel.edu. Mr Samuels Lasner is presently at work on the design & typesetting of a book of reflections on the life of Richard Lancelyn Green, 1953-2004.



Margaret D. Stetz, Curator, *Facing The Late Victorians* (Grolier Club, NYC, Spring 2007): Dr Stetz is the Mae and Robert Carter Professor of Women's Studies and Professor of Humanities at the University of Delaware. Her books include *Facing the Late Victorians* (2007), *Gender and the London Theatre, 1880-1920* (2004), and *British Women's Comic Fiction, 1890—1990: Not Drowning, But Laughing* (2001); with Mark Samuels Lasner, she has co-authored *The Yellow Book: A Centenary Exhibition* (1994), *England in the 1890s: Literary Publishing at the Bodley Head* (1990), and *England in the 1880s: Old Guard and Avant-Garde* (1989); with Cheryl A. Wilson, she has co-edited *Michael Field and Their World*; and with Bonnie B.C. Oh, she has co-edited *Legacies of the Comfort Women of WWII* (2001). She has published more than 100 essays and reviews related to 19th through 21st century literary and cultural history, and she has curated or co-curated seven major exhibitions on Victorian publishing history and art. She received her M.A. from the University of Sussex, UK, and her Ph.D from Harvard University. Before joining the UD faculty in 2002, she taught at the University of Virginia and at Georgetown University. Her teaching interests include women and material culture, women's representations of war, women's comedy, and late-Victorian feminism. Her current book project, due to be published in 2008, is *Wilde, New Women, the Bodley Head and Beyond*. For a **Supplement** of images & commentary of exhibits in the show that are not included in Dr Stetz's monograph, *Facing The Late Victorians*, contact stetzm@udel.edu.



Maureen E. Mulvihill (PhD Wisconsin '82; post-doctoral work: Yale Center for British Art and the Columbia University Rare Book School; NEH Fellow, Johns Hopkins University) is a scholar and writer with The Princeton Research Forum, Princeton, NJ and a specialist on early-modern English & Irish literatures. She is Advisory Editor of *Ireland And The Americas*, 3 vols (Santa Barbara, CA; Cambridge UK: ABC Clio, 2008) and her book credits, to date, include *Poems by Ephelia* (NY, 1992; second printing 1993), nominated for an MLA First Book Prize by Rostenberg & Stern Rare Books, NYC; *Thumbprints of Ephelia* (an online multimedia archive; *ReSoundings* 2001, Millersville University, PA.); 'Ephelia' (Ashgate UK 2003); and the first-ever modern edition, with extended critical essay, of *Poems by Mary Shackleton Leadbeater (Dublin & London, 1808)* for the online *Irish Women Poets* textbase (Alexander Street Press, VA, Summer 2008). Her essay on the British Library's *Oscar Wilde* show (NYC venue: Morgan Library) is published in the *Irish Literary Supplement* (Fall, 2002; digitized, with images, *The Oscholars*, June 2002); and she has contributed essays on Irishwomen writers to the Schlueters' *Encyclopedia of British Women Writers* (1998) and to Alexander Gonzalez's *Irish Women Writers* (2006). To the *Oxford DNB* (2004), she contributed the first-ever article on 18thC Dublin patriot printer, James Esdall. For the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, volume 170, she profiled Joseph Hindmarsh, an 18thC London publisher. A visiting professor & speaker on several campuses, she will speak at the first-ever **James Johnson Sweeney Conference**, April 2008 (Jackson Pollock-Lee Krasner Foundation, NY). She is at work on Irishwomen's political writings, pre-1801.

