WOMEN WRITING ART HISTORY IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

This book sets out to correct received accounts of the emergence of art history as a masculine field. It investigates the importance of female writers from Anna Jameson, Elizabeth Eastlake and George Eliot to Alice Meynell, Vernon Lee and Michael Field in developing a discourse of art notable for its complexity and cultural power, its increasing professionalism and reach, and its integration with other discourses of modernity. Proposing a more flexible and inclusive model of what constitutes art historical writing, including fiction, poetry and travel literature, this book offers a radically revisionist account of the genealogy of a discipline and a profession. It shows how women experienced forms of professional exclusion that, while detrimental to their careers, could be aesthetically formative; how working from the margins of established institutional structures gave women the freedom to be audaciously experimental in their writing about art in ways that resonate with modern readers.

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Nineteenth-century British literature and culture have been rich fields for interdisciplinary studies. Since the turn of the twentieth century, scholars and critics have tracked the intersections and tensions between Victorian literature and the visual arts, politics, social organisation, economic life, technical innovations, scientific thought – in short, culture in its broadest sense. In recent years, theoretical challenges and historiographical shifts have unsettled the assumptions of previous scholarly synthesis and called into question the terms of older debates. Whereas the tendency in much past literary critical interpretation was to use the metaphor of culture as ‘background’, feminist, Foucauldian, and other analyses have employed more dynamic models that raise questions of power and of circulation. Such developments have reanimated the field. This series aims to accommodate and promote the most interesting work being undertaken on the frontiers of the field of nineteenth-century literary studies: work which intersects fruitfully with other fields of study such as history, or literary theory, or the history of science. Comparative as well as interdisciplinary approaches are welcomed.

A complete list of titles published will be found at the end of the book.
For Nick
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This book is deeply informed, of course, by a lifetime of looking at pictures. Looking at art, looking like a woman, is something I have done for as long as I can remember, often with people I love. Particularly moving and formative gallery experiences include Titian in Venice with my Mother in 1990; Edward Hopper with Matthew; Frida Kahlo with Clair; Whistler’s Mother at the Musée d’Orsay (via Mr Bean) with Adam; the Isabella Stuart Gardner Museum with Steven Holtzman, Las Meninas, San Gimignano and, later, Diego Rivera in New York; Anthony Gormley with Russell Celyn Jones and our respective children, Kenwood House (and walks on Hampstead Heath); Eugène Atget and Artemisia Gentileschi in Paris with Martin Sixsmith, Pre-Raphaelites from Port Sunlight to Pegwell Bay. Often looking at art involves tears, and I have wept over art with many a dear friend: over Rodin with Gail Jones, when I had to leave the exhibition because, like George Eliot before the Sistine Madonna, it ‘made my heart swell too much for me to remain comfortably’; over Kathe Kollwitz in Berlin with Orna Raz; over Rothko with Chris Leich; over Matisse and Picasso, especially their love of women’s breasts, with Trish Crawford, who had lost her own, and has since lost her life, to cancer; over Brancusi with Prue Kerr and Nick.

Memories of looking at art with people now dead are especially precious and enable vividly specific reconnection. I recall my father’s good-humoured indulgence whenever I now experience a surfeit of Madonnas; and recollections of a ‘Victorian Ladies’ expedition to the Millais Exhibition in 2007 with Nicola Bown, Ella Dzelzainis and Sally Ledger encapsulate all that I treasure about working with a group of women who are close friends as well as professional colleagues – something that Sally especially fostered, and I miss her. Looking at art with Nick taught me how to see afresh, and left me with a fund of the dearest memories, especially of our intensely happy summer in Florence researching the female art historians who worked there in the nineteenth century. Nick is gone, but is everywhere present in this book, and I dedicate it to his memory.

Note

My thinking for this book has taken place over a number of years, and I have explored aspects of my project in a number of earlier articles that I wish to acknowledge here: ‘Women and the Ends of Art History: Vision and Corporeality in Nineteenth-Century Critical Discourse’.
Acknowledgements