

Preface: “Aesthetic Tracts”

In 1894 the Boston Art Students’ Association invited Sarah Wyman Whitman to deliver a lecture on book design.¹ The fifty-two-year-old Whitman was a successful painter, a stained-glass artist, and book-cover designer. She was also a well-known figure in Boston society - tall, elegantly dressed, and intense to the point of eccentricity. She created, in the words of the philosopher George Santayana who saw her socially, “a striking image” radiating “vivacity and intelligence.”² “She devoted herself,” Santayana wrote, “to instilling the higher spirit of the arts and crafts.”³ Whitman spoke passionately about the book because, for her, it represented more than a physical receptacle for a text; every aspect of its design made an important statement. The book, she asserted, was unlike any other object likely to be decorated because it carried with it a history and an august tradition. “But we must take account of change,” she said, “and one change has been in the enormous increase of books. Instead of having a few precious volumes we have now multitudes, myriads, published every year and sold cheap.”⁴ It was the responsibility of the designer to accept the challenge posed by mass-produced cloth-covered books and to transform them into beautiful objects. She reiterated her credo that the book as an object, in its very physicality, should be an aesthetic declaration: “And what I feel is, that the more difficult it is to produce an artistic success under these conditions, the more necessary it is, because they are really like aesthetic tracts.”⁵

Whitman shared a belief widely held in late nineteenth century design theory that the form and decoration of objects endowed them with meaning. A prolific book cover designer, she claimed that the artist had a responsibility to spread the Aesthetic gospel of beauty through design and maintained that even a mass-market trade book could convey beliefs about beauty, goodness, and the glory of the natural world. Indeed, the historian Roger Stein entitled his introductory essay to a book on the Aesthetic movement “Artifact as Ideology” to underscore the goal of designers of the era who sought to communicate their beliefs and values concretely through things.⁶

The period is significant for its self-conscious, deliberate, and intentional focus on books as a category of things that potentially might express, by their very physical appearance, aesthetic ideals and individual personalities. At the same time books, like other artifacts produced in the then-new industrial system, implicitly posed questions about their cultural status as objects and the role of aesthetics in designing them. All aspects of bookmaking became a subject of great interest and contestation not only among those directly involved in book design but for collectors and social commentators as well. A small coterie of bibliophiles had always been passionate about magnificently produced books, but the attention surrounding the “book as object” intensified as a direct consequence of mass production and

the abundance it generated. Bibliophiles, as well as a number of artists and writers in the late nineteenth century, regarded the book as more than a text and more than a vessel for the author's words; they expressly valued it as a beautiful object or as a medium for individual expression, in short, as a work of art. Book design as a distinct profession did not exist at the time, but more people—both from within the book trade as well as from without—began to take an interest in controlling the appearance of books.⁷ In *Aesthetic Tracts*, I seek to explain why this phenomenon occurred and to explore the strategies that designers used to make books the physical manifestation of ideas and theories about art and culture.

Beginning in the 1980s, book historians have examined the relationship between a text and its physical embodiment, analyzing how a book's material form often unconsciously shapes the sense of the text.⁸ I have chosen instead to concentrate on significant late nineteenth century books designed by writers, artists, and printers who purposefully and deliberately sought to create the material housing for specific books that would enhance the text and its meaning. Or, to paraphrase the historian Jerome McGann, they designed books to be read with the eye as much as the mind.⁹ Art historians often understand objects as inadvertent *reflections* of ideologies or historical conditions. In contrast, I wish to examine objects that were *intentionally designed* as aesthetic manifestoes in Whitman's sense of the term during the period from 1875 to 1900 in France, England, and the United States.

Book designers' self-conscious choice to make ideas visible in their designs was both revolutionary and an international phenomenon. They chose specific cover designs, page layouts, and typefaces to express their ideas and values about the text or to give material form to their own aesthetic credos. Some wrote about what they were doing and why.

The keen attention paid to the appearance of things was an integral part of a new commercial system that regarded objects as potential if not actual merchandise. Margaret Cohen and Anne Higonnet, historians of visual culture, affirm this connection between mass production, art, and commodification:

If, as Marx observed, the senses are not natural but rather historical, they must be affected by transformations in relations of production and exchange. One consequence of the commodification of all relations attending modernity is a heightened attention to visual appearance. When objects become commodities, they take on the power to stimulate the desire and fantasies of consumers on account of the human labor they both congeal and mask. This stimulus comes from their sensual aspect, and above all their visuality, that plays such an important role in how they are marketed and displayed.¹⁰

Broad cultural transformations contributed to an environment that encouraged people to conceptualize books as instruments of visual expression. For the first time in history, people of all classes could afford to buy a wide range of objects, including books. In addition, development of new technologies revolutionized the printing of images and text so that books not only cost less to produce but also could be made more appealing to the purchaser. For members of the upper class, however, this new abundance often provoked feelings of anguish and disgust at the commodification of the arts, as well as recognition of the ambiguity of their own social status. Finally, the discovery of non-Western art, especially Japanese prints, inspired artists schooled in the European tradition to appropriate aspects of other cultures and dramatically expand and transform their own visual vocabulary.

Studies of British book history have emphasized the importance of the “revival of printing” movement and the ideas expounded by William Morris, but these developments represented only one aspect of a much greater change in print culture. The consequences of the Industrial Revolution and the associated commodification of objects together form the underlying context of my understanding of this period in design history. For this reason I have examined books as subjects, that is, as designed objects whose production and formal properties are of interest in themselves; in addition, I view them as “objects as evidence,” through which we may understand the aesthetics and attitudes concerning material culture of this period. The reception accorded particular books, book illustration, and cover design at the time is significant. Book design did not, and for the most part never does, follow national boundaries. For reasons of my linguistic limitations I have confined my analysis to books produced in France, Great Britain, and the United States; German, Dutch, Belgian, and Scandinavian examples might profitably be studied as well.

William Peterson’s *Kelmscott Press* and Susan Otis Thompson’s *American Book Design and William Morris* have described the significance of Morris’s ideas and practice as well as the “revival of printing” movement in England and America.¹¹ I will, therefore, consider Morris’s theories and book designs only as they directly influenced other book designers. Two recent studies have focused on the materiality of the book in Britain. Gerard Curtis’s *Visual Words: Art and the Material Book in Victorian England* provides a detailed analysis of the relationship between English illustration and literature during this period.¹² Kenneth Clay Smith Jr.’s dissertation, “The Book as Material Instrument: London Literary Publishing, 1885–1900,” examines this period in England when books “became highly-rendered aesthetic objects” valued for their visual beauty more than their content.¹³

For her study of artifacts in the context of the consumer revolution, I am indebted to Rosalind H. Williams’s *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France*.¹⁴ Within this framework, I have chosen to concentrate on



the aesthetics of book design at the advent of the mass market. I will focus on the ways in which bookmakers exploited new print technologies and their access to an expanding universe of visual ideas to imbue their book designs with meaning.

The late nineteenth century should be seen neither as a precursor of modernism, as it is sometimes described, nor as the fading end of the Victorian age, as it is often denigrated. Instead, book design in this period exhibited tremendous diversity in form and quality, and it cannot be encompassed by either of these views. As the book historian Ruari McLean wrote: “There is no doubt that towards the end of the nineteenth century, the quality of ordinary materials and workmanship in many industries, including printing, was declining, but although if one tries to build up a collection of really bad work produced between, say, 1880 and 1914, it is surprising how much easier good work is to find.”¹⁵ And writing specifically about collecting French illustrated books, Gordon N. Ray noted a sharp revision in modern critical assessments: “rejection and neglect have been followed by rediscovery and ardent pursuit.”¹⁶ In *Aesthetic Tracts* I do not attempt a survey of the book arts, nor do I seek to create a canon of extraordinary examples of book design. Rather, I have considered why so many in this era prized the physicality of the book and wished to shape its design into ideological statements in Whitman’s concept of *aesthetic tracts*. It is addressed to those interested in graphic design and book design as well as in the history of material culture and printing. I hope, too, that it will introduce the general reader to the disputes and treasures of the period.

Economic, technical, and cultural forces changed ideas about the book as object. Chapter 1 considers the technological advances in printing and the reorganization of the book trade that occurred in response to the massive increase in book production. Well aware of these transformations, sociologists of the era attempted to explain the social and aesthetic consequences of the new material abundance, particularly as applied to books. The introduction of Japanese aesthetics and the great international exhibitions that flourished during the era also expanded contemporary ideas about the decorative arts.

Chapter 2 focuses on cover design. Bookbinders consciously rejected the continuing use of traditional motifs in favor of creating designs that would imbue covers with significance beyond mere decoration. At the same time, publishers began to view covers as eminently useful forms of advertising.

Sarah Wyman Whitman’s career blossomed in the milieu of Japonisme and early cloth-binding designs. Chapter 3 traces the way she applied Japanese artistic concepts to trade books to engage with the meaning in the text.

Chapter 4 describes Eugène Grasset and Charles Gillot’s *Histoire des quatre fils Aymon, très nobles et très vaillans chevaliers* as a technical tour de force that produced a new form of graphic narrative in which the visual format redefined and reinvigorated an ancient text.

The widespread use of illustration in books of literature provoked angry responses among those devoted to the supremacy of the written word. Chapter 5 analyzes how the incursion of pictures into literary texts transformed the status of the book and the illustrator and inspired a new kind of book: the *livre d'artiste*.

Chapter 6 explores ideas about books and their decoration espoused by three contemporary writers: James McNeill Whistler, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Oscar Wilde. These highly self-conscious artists shaped their own books to advance their aesthetics and took great pains to ensure that the material form of these volumes precisely reflected their intentions.

Although many bibliophiles decried the deterioration of book production and some joined the revival of printing movement, not all designers wished to create books as objects of material beauty. Instead, they insisted on the preeminence of the text. Chapter 7 describes these responses in the work and ideas of three printer-publishers: Édouard Pelletan, Walter Biggar Blaikie, and Theodore Low De Vinne.

Institutions sponsored major exhibitions of books throughout this period, sometimes as part of the then-frequent international expositions, or world's fairs, but also within more focused book fairs and book exhibitions. Chapter 8 concludes with an account of the changing status of books as objects, the issues of nationalism that affected the critical response to book design, and the evolution of new ideas in book design as revealed by these international events.

As the contemporary book designer Richard Hendel reminds us, "book design is inextricably tied to the dual tradition of how we read and what we think books should look like."¹⁷ In Western Europe and the United States in the latter part of the nineteenth century, more people than ever before were literate, more could afford to buy books, and some among them developed very strong opinions about how books should be designed.