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The Victorians: Art and Culture Transcript

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The Victorians: Art and Culture

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(1) Perhaps the most characteristic and certainly, subsequently, the most notorious apostle of Victorian culture was Dr Thomas Bowdler, editor of *The Family Shakespeare, in Ten Volumes; in which nothing is added to the original text; but those words and expressions are omitted which cannot with propriety be read aloud in a family*. The omissions were indeed striking. Derogatory references to clergymen are expunged, parts of the body are not referred to, the word "body" itself is generally replaced with the word "person", and immoral characters such as the prostitute Doll Tearsheet (2) in *Henry IV Part II*, a popular subject for illustrators like Thomas Rowlandson, disappear entirely. When it comes to *Othello*, a play in which adultery (a subject "unfortunately little suited for family reading", as Bowdler complained), is at the core of the plot, the self-appointed censor gave up the unequal struggle, praising the play as an admirable vehicle for teaching the Christian lesson that "adultery is a crime next to murder", but warning that if his version was not deemed suitable for family reading, it should be removed "from the parlour to the cabinet".

Bowdler also produced a sanitized edition of Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, cutting out entirely the famous or notorious fourteenth and fifteenth chapters, with their savage and satirical attack on Christianity, and, as his nephew later noted, producing a text which "could no longer raise a blush on the cheek of modest innocence, nor plant a pang in the heart of the devoutest Christian". He even claimed that Gibbon would have desired "nothing more ardently" than to see his work improved in this way.

But Bowdler was not quite what he seemed, or posterity, which invented the word "bowdlerize" to denote a foolish or misconceived editing of a text to remove contentious passages, has depicted. To begin with, he did not actually edit Shakespeare and Gibbon at all. The task was actually carried out by his sister Harriet, who was well enough known in society circles to have her portrait painted by Sir Thomas Lawrence (3). But the two considered it would be wrong to admit that a woman could actually understand the sexual allusions of Shakespeare's lewder passages, which it was necessary to do in order to excise them, of course, or some of Gibbon's notoriously lascivious footnotes, so it went out under his name - he was a doctor of medicine, after all, whose knowledge of such things would be accepted. And then again, the first version of Bowdler's Shakespeare was produced not in the Victorian era, but as early as 1804, and the book reached its final form in 1818. Bowdler himself, in any case, was not a Victorian at all, but died in 1825.

What counted, however, was not the genesis and original publication date of Bowdler's editions, but the fact that the Shakespeare at least went through 50 further editions all the way up to 1896, and this is why Bowdler, and Bowdlerization, a term invented in 1836, are thought of in general terms as "Victorian". While the early editions were heavily criticized for what one reviewer called their assumption that families would be too 'squeamish' to read Shakespeare aloud in the original, as early as 1820 the *Edinburgh Review* was declaring that 'it is better every way that what cannot be spoken, and ought not to have been written, should now cease to be printed'.

In her novel *Adam Bede*, George Eliot described the characteristic behaviour of a gentleman of the pre-Victorian world, 'Old Leisure', who 'knew nothing of weekday services, and thought none the worse of the Sunday sermon if it allowed him to sleep from the text to the blessing' for he had an easy, jolly conscience, broad-backed like himself, and able to carry a great deal of beer or port-wine - not being made squeamish by doubts and qualms and lofty aspirations. Life was not a task to him, but a sinecure: he fingered the guineas in his pocket, and ate his dinners, and slept the sleep of the irresponsible.' He lacked, in other words, the *moral and intellectual seriousness* that came to seem one of the defining characteristics of the Victorian age. As the journalist W. R. Greg wrote admiringly of the great Victorian headmaster of Rugby boarding school, Thomas Arnold, (4) after his death in 1844, incidentally illustrating how much the values he described were shared across Europe:

The predominant characteristic of Dr. Arnold's mind, and that for which above all others we honour him, was his *earnestness*. The idea conveyed by the motto from Schiller, which Carlyle has prefixed to his 'Past and Present' - *Ernst ist das Leben* - seems to have been, in all its magnificent meaning, perpetually present to his thoughts. Life, in his view of it, was no pilgrimage of pleasure, but a scene of toil, of effort, of appointed work - of grand purposes to be striven for - of vast ends to be achieved - of fearful evils to be uprooted or trampled down - of sacred and mighty principles to be asserted and carried out.

Before Dr Arnold's influence had made itself felt across the educational system, as Lytton Strachey later noted, 'when the school hours were over, the boys were free to enjoy themselves as they liked to bathe, to fish, to ramble for long afternoons in the country, collecting eggs or gathering flowers'. Afterwards, athletics and 'good form', morals, respectability, and religion came to dominate their lives, to the detriment not only of freedom, as Strachey complained, but also of learning.

The dominant cultural models of the era, and through much of the nineteenth century, were Classical; the education of the upper and middle classes concentrated on Latin and Ancient Greek, and through the poetry, history, philosophy and drama of Classical authors, attempted to impart to young men values variously described as 'Corinthian', 'Athenian' or, at the tougher end of education, 'spartan'. In architecture, Classical ideals of proportion dominated, derived from the Roman writer Vitruvius; in sculpture, the ideal form was considered to be embodied in Classical works such as the Apollo Belvedere (5). The Royal Academy, founded in 1768, concentrated accordingly on teaching its students to observe Classical principles of proportion in drawing from life, learning them from copying ancient statues, studying the basic principles of anatomy, and in general following Classical ideals of beauty that had been represented most graphically in Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*. (6) Even as late as the end of the century, academic art education was still based on these principles, rigidly enforced by professors who rejected any form of innovation and continued to exert a powerful influence on the world of art exhibitions and art criticism. Artists like Constable and Turner, for all their later departure from Classical principles, went through this training, which left its indelible mark on their work. Art and literature were permeated by Classical references, from the poetry of Keats, most obviously his *Ode on a Grecian Urn* but more generally throughout his work, to the popular verses by Thomas Babington Macaulay, *Lays of Ancient Rome*, a best-seller in its time, memorized, willingly or otherwise, by generations of Victorian schoolboys (7).

Macaulay's work proved a godsend to teachers attempting to make the Classics interesting and exciting for their pupils as well as edifying and uplifting. As Dr Arnold remarked:

It has always seemed to me one of the great advantages of the course of study generally pursued in our English schools, that it draws our minds so continually to dwell upon the past. Every day we are engaged in studying the languages, the history, and the thoughts of men who lived nearly or more than two thousand years ago; if we have to inquire about laws or customs, about works of art or science, they are the laws, customs, arts, and sciences, not of existing nations, but of those whose course has been long since ended.

Arnold saw this study as a kind of moral and mental discipline that would equip boys with the sound principles needed for adult life. But of course these principles had to be derived as well from the teachings of Christianity; and Victorian Classicism differed in this respect perhaps more than any other from the Classicism of the Enlightenment, which in works such as Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, influenced by the religious scepticism of French thinkers like Voltaire, had treated Christianity as an emotional, irrational and ultimately destructive historical force that perhaps more than any other had led to the downfall of Classical civilization and the coming of the dark ages of credulity and superstition.

Gibbon certainly regarded history as 'philosophy teaching by examples', but in his use of irony and satire, not to speak of his sometimes scurrilous footnotes, he appeared to Victorian critics as essentially lacking in moral seriousness. This, indeed, was for many Victorians a touchstone of literary and historical value. Hence Carlyle's criticism of Sir Walter Scott, whose *Waverley* novels, he complained, contained nothing that was 'profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for edification, for building up or elevating in any shape!' Indeed as George Cruikshank's illustration to *Waverley* shows (8), they were widely treated as pure entertainment. Yet the *Waverley* novels were more than a mere relic of a more frivolous age. They were, in fact, among the first characteristic literary products of the dominant cultural movement of the first half of the nineteenth century, Romanticism, and Romanticism was itself not least a reaction against the rationalist and materialist spirit of the Enlightenment.

If the Enlightenment had stressed the need to subordinate the emotions to the intellect, Romanticism took the opposite line and stressed instead the emotions as the fundamental source of truth, authenticity and their expression in art. The emergence of Romanticism reflected widespread European revulsion against the excesses of the Revolution and Terror in France, a revulsion shared in full measure in Britain, and widely ascribed to the hegemony of abstract and rigid conceptions of how human happiness was to be achieved. At the same time, however, Romanticism was also a revolt against the social hierarchies and rigidities of the eighteenth century. The characteristic Romantic figure was not an artist, writer or composer bound in a web of patronage and convention, but a lone figure such as the German painter (9) Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above a Sea of Fog* (1818), confronting a sublime Romantic landscape after conquering its peaks, contemplating an unknown and uncertain future. Often the artist himself was depicted as an isolated individual fighting against the world and defying convention: Beethoven rather than Haydn, for example. The idea of the tortured genius was central to the Romantic ideal of art.

So too was the revival of interest in the Middle Ages, seen not as a dark period of credulity and superstition, but as an era of great deeds and deep emotions, far away from the prosaic and mechanical world of early industrial society. Romantic groups such as the Pre-Raphaelites sought to return to a world not just before the Enlightenment but also, as their name deliberately proclaimed, the Renaissance, or at least its later phases. Romanticism depicted the wildness of nature as something not to be tamed and ordered, but to be admired as sublime and picturesque, more powerful than the ephemeral creations of humanity, as in Turner's *Snowstorm: Hannibal and his Army crossing the Alps* (10) - note the Classical theme. The language of the Romantic poets emphasized its roots in ordinary speech, rejecting the artificiality of Classical metre and rhyme. Romantic art aimed at arousing strong emotions, not just happiness and sadness, but particularly in its choice of subjects, awe, terror, even revulsion: the Gothic revival manifested itself not just in paintings and buildings but also in the Gothic novel, using a medieval setting as an active element in the creation of an atmosphere of terror and gloom, even when, as in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the ostensible subject is the perversion of modern science (as in this frontispiece to the 1831 edition). (11)

All of this may have been a reaction against the French Revolution, but it was at the same time a revolt against the rise of respectable society, driven not least by a desire to shock by attacking social as well as cultural and artistic convention. Byron and Shelley were rebels against conventional morality, just as Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites used working-class girls and even prostitutes as models. Yet Romanticism also contained within itself the seeds of a very different kind of aesthetic moral code. By emphasizing the primacy of the emotions in the human spirit, it opened the way for religion to escape the scorn of Enlightenment rationalists and to come back into the cultural mainstream. A return to the Middle Ages for inspiration could not avoid taking up the religious subjects that were central to the aesthetic of the era. This in turn implied Christian morality as a basis for the representational message conveyed by the artist.

Thus Holman Hunt, one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood in 1848, chose as his subjects not only poems based on medieval legends, like *The Lady of Shalott*, (12) but also religious and moral topics, as in *The Awakening Conscience*, showing a mistress or kept woman beginning to repent of her sinful way of life. (13) The topic might have been shocking, but the message was thoroughly conventional. In a similar way, another of the Pre-Raphaelites, John Everett Millais, was widely criticized for his 1851 painting *Christ in the House of his Parents*, not least for depicting a working-class family in a rather dirty and disordered workshop. (14) Charles Dickens denounced in particular the picture's representation of the Virgin Mary as 'so hideous in her ugliness that ... she would stand out from the rest of the company as a Monster, in the vilest cabaret in France, or the lowest gin-shop in England.' Yet the religious seriousness behind the painting was obvious. Acceptance as an artist came to Millais, however, as he turned to historical paintings, for example of the Princes in the Tower, (15) and then to portraiture, not to mention his hugely successful and undeniably sentimental *Bubbles*, (16) painted in 1885-86 and subsequently used as an advertisement for Pear's soap (17). Millais, indeed, ended his career with a knighthood, while Hunt was made a member of the Order of Merit.

For all their rebelliousness, too, the pre-Raphaelites can be seen as bearers of a wider religious and moral reaction against the ribaldry and bawdiness of the eighteenth-century and Regency cartoonists. As Thomas Bowdler suggested, the home was to be the centre of Victorian culture: middle-class families read out loud to each other at home, played and sang music together, played cards and board games, ate and drank within the house, and generally entertained and amused themselves domestically rather by going out to do so. As the middle class grew in numbers and confidence in the decades following the ending of the Napoleonic Wars and the rapid growth of prosperity with Britain's booming industry and trade, so the bourgeois virtues of regularity, hard work, seriousness, sobriety, modesty, piety and civic engagement began to prosper too. And a relatively new image of women as modest and delicate led to a growing tendency in society, or at least in polite society, to argue that men should become more civilized out of respect for the sensibilities of the female sex.

A group such as the Pre-Raphaelites also conformed to bourgeois cultural models in another way too, by signaling a move away from the paradigm of the individual, isolated artistic genius to a close-knit society of equals united in a common cause. Driven on by the Evangelical revival of the early 19th century, societies and voluntary associations sprang up all over Britain, and in many of them, middle-class women played leading roles. As F. K. Brown has remarked, the period up to the accession of Queen Victoria saw the foundation of 'societies to improve, to enforce, to reform, to benefit, to prevent, to relieve, to educate, to reclaim, to encourage, to propagate, to maintain, to promote, to provide for, to support, to effect, to better, to instruct, to protect, to supersede, to employ, to civilize, to visit, to preserve, to convert, to mitigate, to abolish, to investigate, to publish, to aid, to extinguish. Above all there were societies to suppress.' This was, as Asa Briggs put it in his classic history of the period, the *Age of Improvement*. Moral entrepreneurs from William Wilberforce onwards campaigned and brought prosecutions against what they regarded as immoral art and literature. Bourgeois respectability was triumphing over aristocratic licentiousness and

plebeian immorality. Cartoonists such as Gillray and the Cruikshanks, whose grotesque satirical images such as this one, from 1812, *The Prince of Whales or the Fisherman at Anchor*, (18) shows the future George IV swimming in a sea of politics while spouting the 'liquor of oblivion' over the Whigs and the 'dew of favour' over the Tory fishermen who have hooked him, while the prince's mistress Lady Hertford looks longingly at him, her horned husband behind her. This kind of ribald cynicism was no longer appropriate for the age of seriousness and improvement, of progress and reform; the middle classes and liberal society wanted to believe in the honesty and good will of politicians and public servants, above all after the great Reform Act of 1832 had removed the abuses reformers had been struggling to sweep away. Good causes were not to be doubted or made fun of; and what censorship could not suppress, fashion consigned to oblivion.

The seriousness of Victorian art was shared by the moral purposefulness of Victorian literature. This was the great age of the realist novel, whose aim was not just to depict society in all its complexity, but also to depict it in the throes of rapid change, and in many cases to link it to the cause of moral, social or political reform. Early Romantic writing in Britain sought above all, as in the work of Wordsworth, Coleridge or Keats, to convey in lyrical form the individual's reactions to the world of nature, or, as in Byron (19) and Scott, the individual's progress through a picaresque series of Romantic adventures. But by the 1830s, industrialization, freeing the economy from direct dependence on the natural world of agriculture; the rapid growth of cities, bringing millions into a new, harsh and unforgiving urban world; the emergence of new social classes and new social antagonisms; and the arrival on the moral and political agenda of questions such as poverty, death and disease, exploitation, inequality, and social evils of many kinds, called forth the realist novel as a means of portraying the collectivity of society, with its teeming mass of characters and its shifting relations between them.

The master here was of course Charles Dickens, many of whose works sought to lay bare in literary form the evils of the age and advocate by showing their dramatic consequences the need to tackle them: *Oliver Twist* (20) addressed the state of crime and disorder in London, *Nicholas Nickleby* the exploitation and maltreatment of unwanted children in private boarding-schools, and so on. (21) Benjamin Disraeli, indeed, used novels as a way of urging the need for reform and bridging the gap between what he called 'two nations - the rich and the poor'. Novelists sought to encompass the often bewildering changes brought about by industrialization, and to urge upon their readers ways of dealing with them. George Eliot's *Felix Holt, the Radical*, for example, published in 1866 during the debates about the extension of voting rights that was passed by Parliament the following year, portrayed the events surrounding the passage of the First Reform Act in 1832 and made a strong plea for the education of the masses. Of course, the realist novel was far more than any of this: it enabled the writer to explore in unprecedented depth and with subtlety and sensitivity the complexities of human feeling at a time when old certainties were dissolving; thus it transcended its immediate subject and remained alive and relevant long after the problems it addressed on the surface had passed into history. But the secret of its success lay in the first instance in its appeal to contemporary readers.

Realist novels could flourish not least because of the emergence of a new market for books, as the middle classes grew in numbers and wealth, and merchants, industrialists, lawyers, bankers, employers and landowners were joined in the ranks of the affluent by doctors, teachers, civil servants, scientists, and white-collar workers of various kinds, numbering more than 300,000 in the 1851 census (22), the first time they were counted, more than double that number thirty years later. Literary rates improved with the spread of education; if 67 per cent of men and 51 per cent of women could sign their name rather than put a cross or a mark in 1840, the figures had reached 81 per cent and 73 per cent in 1871, during which period the population of the UK had risen by some 40 per cent. Books became cheaper and more plentiful as steam-driven presses replaced hand-operated presses in the printing industry (23), and as mechanical production reduced the cost of paper while hugely increasing the supply. As people read more newspapers, especially after the abolition of stamp duty in 1864, so they also read more books; if 580 books were published in the UK every year between 1800 and 1825, more than 2,500 appeared annually in mid-century, and more than 6,000 by the end of the century. In all of this, despite the growing taste for non-fiction, ranging from encyclopedias and handbooks to triple-decker biographies, the proportion of works of fiction published increased from 16 per cent in the 1830s to nearly 25 per cent half a century later.

Large novels, of which there were plenty in the Victorian period, remained relatively expensive to buy, so many writers published them first in serial form. *The Pickwick Papers* for example appeared in twenty monthly parts in 1836-7, with 40,000 subscribers paying in monthly instalments; magazines sprang up to satisfy this demand, such as the *Cornhill*, which was launched in 1860 in an edition of 120,000 with the first instalment of a new novel by Trollope and contributions by Thackeray and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (24). You could buy instalments long after their original appearance; the publishers Chapman and Hall had in stock no fewer than 2,290,000 copies of various instalments of Dickens's novels on sale in 1847. The critic W. R. Greg thought that novels were becoming addictive, numbing the brain with their endless supply of descriptive prose.

At the centre of all this work was the home, its delights, its sanctity, its loss, its recovery; familiar territory to the bourgeois

reader. Even poets such as Tennyson or Browning sought domestic themes, however much they might be disguised with the trappings of a past or mythical age. But by mid-century, prose had replaced poetry as the favoured reading matter of the middle classes; 'we have become a novel-reading people', Trollope announced in 1870s. Prose fiction addressed overwhelmingly the present. Like the television soap-operas of the present day, it allowed consumers to inhabit a world parallel to their own, where moral and social dramas were played out in ways that were recognizably similar to their own lives, but more eventful and exciting, and which sometimes prompted the desire to subscribe to the reforming spirit of the age.

The huge print-runs of some of these works, and the technological innovations that made them possible, suggested that with the spread of literacy, reading for pleasure was beginning to spread far beyond the confines of the middle classes. However much men like Ruskin or Wordsworth might complain of the vulgarity of working-class tourists, the emerging working classes of the industrial age also read with increasing enthusiasm, helped by the spread of public libraries and the growing ability of publishers and printers to produce cheap books and pamphlets. As prices continued to come down, Charles Knight began to publish his *Penny Magazine* in the 1830s and 1840s, dedicated to the educational improvement of the working class. (25) Reprints of popular novels could be bought for two shillings by the 1850s, while the publisher Richard Bentley was producing one-shilling books in his 'Railway Library' at the same time. Such improving popular literature did not plunge into a cultural vacuum; it was largely aimed at replacing what serious-minded reformers regarded as the vulgar and corrupting influence of 'penny dreadfuls', sensational popular novels that were the heirs of the notorious 'Newgate Calendar' of the eighteenth century (26).

These often took their cue from stage melodramas, which from early beginnings in the eighteenth century reached the height of their popularity during the Victorian era. Usually featuring a villain, a damsel in distress, a brave but guileless young hero, an aged parent and a comic character, they combined the themes of love and crime, and often invited audience participation, especially by hissing the villain whenever he appeared. Popular novels were themselves sometimes used as the basis for melodramas such as *Spring-Heeled Jack*, (27) which depicted a villainous figure able to jump over rooftops as he evaded his pursuers. On sale for a penny, these lurid and sensational works earned the strong disapproval of the moral arbiters of the day. By the middle of the century, they were increasingly centred on scenes of urban life and crime, reflecting the new, dominant social setting of the era. Seen on stage, the stories they featured were often presented with songs and musical interludes, merging into the music hall, which emerged as a form of popular entertainment in the 1850s. The first to be opened was the Canterbury Hall in Lambeth (28), in 1852; by 1878 there were 78 large music halls in the capital city, along with hundreds of smaller venues, often including pubs, which increasingly offered entertainments of their own if they were large enough. Songs and dances, with comic and acrobatic or juggling acts, were introduced by a *compère* while the audience ate and drank their way through the evening, which often ended in riotous disorder. (29) The messages purveyed in music-hall songs were hardly revolutionary - as one of them had it, 'It's a *little* bit of what yer fancies does yer good' - but moral reformers strongly disapproved of the ribaldry of performers such as Marie Lloyd. Soon a licence was required to open a music hall, and on the eve of the First World War alcohol was finally banned on music-hall premises, bringing the music-hall tradition to an end.

Music-hall represented a newly invented form of popular entertainment, but it did not bring music to the masses for the first time. On the contrary, music, song and dance were an indispensable part of everyday life in the pre-industrial world and in the countryside where most people in Britain lived for most of the nineteenth century. Men and women sang to set the rhythm of their work during sowing and reaping, spinning or weaving, relieving the boredom and repetition of their tasks as well; musical instruments such as fiddles, pipes and drums, were brought out for special occasions such as weddings or dances; people sang songs handed down to them from their parents' generation in their leisure time. Popular cultural activities could also include wood-carving and embroidery, and in many respects merged into work as people made and decorated objects that would be useful as well as pleasing to look at.

Folk art traditions began to be lost as people migrated to the towns and found other sources of entertainment such as the music hall. As this happened, however, professional artists, writers and musicians began to take a serious interest in them, driven on by a desire to recover and preserve what they regarded as an ancient national cultural heritage. Organizations like the English Folk-Song Society sprang up at the end of the century, and musicians such as Ralph Vaughan Williams began transcribing and, with the aid of new technology such as the phonograph, invented in 1878 and developed in further ways in the following years, recording on wax cylinders some of the now usually rather old men and women who sang the traditional songs of the countryside. All of this sounded perfectly innocuous, and indeed conjures up images of sandle-wearing, homespun-clad, middle-class intellectuals searching for an alternative lifestyle that would get away from industrially produced goods and an urban way of life and recapture the natural, simple skills and styles of traditional folk art: the Arts and Crafts movement begun in the 1880s by William Morris, under the influence of John Ruskin, tried indeed to do just that (30).

But the rediscovery of folk art had a much more profound impact than this. The fundamental reason lies in the Europeanization, indeed, the globalization of culture during the second half of the nineteenth century. So far I've been talking about Victorian culture as if it was purely British, but in fact as communications developed, in the myriad ways I talked about in my first lecture, so culture became international. Of course this had to some extent always been the case: Josef Haydn had been lionized in London in the late eighteenth century, while earlier on, Georg Friedrich Handel had made his home there; painters such as Canaletto, Rubens, Rembrandt and the Renaissance masters had been collected all over Europe, and indeed the Royal Academy had been founded in part from a belief on the part of Sir Joshua Reynolds and others that English art was being neglected in the country of its origin; famous works of fiction from *Don Quixote* to *Robinson Crusoe* had been translated into many languages including English.

But in the last decades of the nineteenth century this kind of cosmopolitanism grew far more rapidly than before. There were limits, of course: foreign dramatists like Ibsen and Strindberg rarely found their work performed in London, for example; on the other hand, foreign music dominated the concert halls and opera houses, and foreign artists the galleries and museums of the capital and increasingly too, given the status of London as the world's financial capital, its auction houses and art market as well. What really made the difference however was the advent of technological innovations that made it far easier than before to spread culture across the European continent and even across the globe: the steamship and the railway, making travel faster and easier; the phonograph, the photograph, the motion picture, even, more prosaically, the development of photo-engraving, enabling the cheap reproduction of works of art. All of this began towards the turn of the century to have a profound effect on the Victorian cultural world.

Such innovations linked Britain and Europe to what were widely regarded as 'primitive' cultures as European empires cemented their hold on their African and Asian colonies. African artworks such as this Benin bronze plaque (31) were first regarded as little more than curiosities. But for artists seeking a way forward from Victorian convention and the hidebound restrictions of the Academies, they exerted a strong fascination. When the young Spanish artist Pablo Picasso first saw African art in a Paris exhibition in 1907, he began to experiment with incorporating its forms into his own musical compositions. (32) The term 'primitivism', also applied to Henri Matisse, who initially introduced African art to Picasso, was soon used to describe such work: and not only in the visual arts. In music, composers such as Béla Bartók, here seen recording Czech folk songs in 1908, discovered that the rhythms and harmonies of folk music were often very different from those of the European classics. (33) He began incorporating them into his own, work, taking it dramatically away from the tradition of Beethoven and Brahms. Similarly, Igor Stravinsky's ballet *The Rite of Spring*, which caused a riot at its first performance in Paris in 1913, gained much of its disruptive power through its conscious musical and visual attempt to convey an imagined world of pagan rituals as described by the primitivist painter Nicholas Roerich, who designed the sets and costumes. (34).

But it wasn't just 'primitivism' that disrupted aesthetic convention. Artists and composers looked to it because they felt that the western traditions sustained by the Academies had reached their limits. Already in the 1870s, the emergence of Impressionism as an artistic movement that rejected the idea of objectivity in painting and sought instead to capture the effect, or impression, made by a subject on the eye of the painter, was spreading to England, as its leading exponent Claude Monet fled Paris for London during the Commune of 1871, painting the Thames at Westminster shortly after he arrived (35). Impressionism found relatively few English imitators - Wilson Steer, whose painting of the beach at Walberswick is probably his best known, was one of only a handful - (36) but that in a sense did not matter; what mattered is that the work of the French Impressionists was soon available in England, helping to undermine conventions of representation and heralding the end of the Classical model of culture that had underpinned so much of the artistic production of the nineteenth century. To these influences were added those I described at the end of my previous lecture, as new concepts of time and space and technological innovations such as motion pictures began to undermine conventional ideas of representation as well, and the machine began to replace nature as the object of interest for futurist artists such as the self-styled Vorticist Wyndham Lewis (37)

Modernist art and culture, emerging around of the turn of the century, was in some ways the ultimate expression of the Victorian idea of progress, transforming it into the belief that only the new was valuable. To a number of artists, writers, and musicians, conventional means of expression seemed to have reached their limits; composers began to abandon tonality, painters moved towards abstraction. But the cultural *avant-garde*, as it came to be known, had little or no resonance in the world of middle-class cultural consumers. Insofar as they aroused any reaction at all, the works of Picasso, or Stravinsky, or Schoenberg, or Kandinsky, aroused mainly outrage and incomprehension. These were the beginnings of a gap between contemporary art and music and the cultured public that has continued to the present day. Ironically it was to be through popular art and music, through posters and advertisements, and through film scores, that modernism found its way most forcefully into the wider public and gained a measure of acceptance usually denied it in the concert hall and the art gallery.

The break-up of the middle-class, Victorian culture I've been describing in this lecture was heralded in the 1890s by a conscious revolt against Victorian values by the decadent movement, in which artists like Aubrey Beardsley, under the influence of the self-styled decadent poets in France, broke with convention and published shocking and erotic illustrations to equally shocking literary works like Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*. (38) Wilde's own epigrams were aimed straight at the heart of Victorian convention: 'work is the curse of the drinking classes'; 'a little sincerity is a dangerous thing, and a great deal of it is fatal'; and most notoriously perhaps, referring to a tragic scene in Charles Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*: 'one must have a heart of stone not to laugh at the death of Little Nell'. (39) What was a serious subject for the Victorians, imbued with religious and moral significance, had become a subject for witticisms at the end of the century. Death indeed formed a central concern of the Victorians, and how to deal with it was a central question they faced. In my next lecture, on 13th December, I'll turn to the subject of 'death and the Victorians' and look at some of the social and physical realities underpinning what often seems to us in the twenty-first century the morbid and faintly ridiculous fascination that the subject had for contemporaries.

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