

## 1894: The year of the new woman art critic

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## Meaghan Clarke, “1894: The Year of the New Woman Art Critic”

### Art Writing as a Profession

By the last decades of the nineteenth century, there was already a strong precedent for women writing art criticism in Britain. Several women were writing about art at the beginning of the Victorian period. Mariana Starke's travel guides had pre-dated John Murray and Anna Jameson's writings for the *Penny Magazine* had pre-dated John Ruskin and Jameson's work on collections and iconography; such work continued to be referenced throughout the century by art scholars, as well as the wider public. Translation and gallery guides were also critical for these early writers. For example, the writer Mary Merrifield's first published work in 1844 was a translation of Cennino Cennini's 1437 treatise on painting, while the artist and writer Kate Thompson in 1877 combined a guide to major European Galleries with an introduction to art historical schools. It is hardly surprising that, with the explosion in the periodical press in the 1880s, women contributed to ever more publications. These included journals associated with the New Journalism for the masses, such as the *Star* and *Pall Mall Gazette*, the general-interest *Illustrated London News*, and specialist presses such as the *Art Journal* and *Magazine of Art*. The other crucial development in art writing was that illustrations accompanied essays and articles. By the 1890s, readers could not only envision London exhibitions through the press, but the accompanying full-page prints could be framed to envision the latest in fashionable domestic interiors.

This period also coincided with fundamental shifts in professionalization for women, including the establishment of professional societies such as the Society of Women Journalists and the Women Authors Club, both of which included women art writers as members. Through their attendance at private views and exhibition openings, women were regularly visible in the art world. An article published in 1892 entitled “Art Critics of Today,” named numerous critics who wrote for daily and weekly newspapers and the art press, and the list included several women.

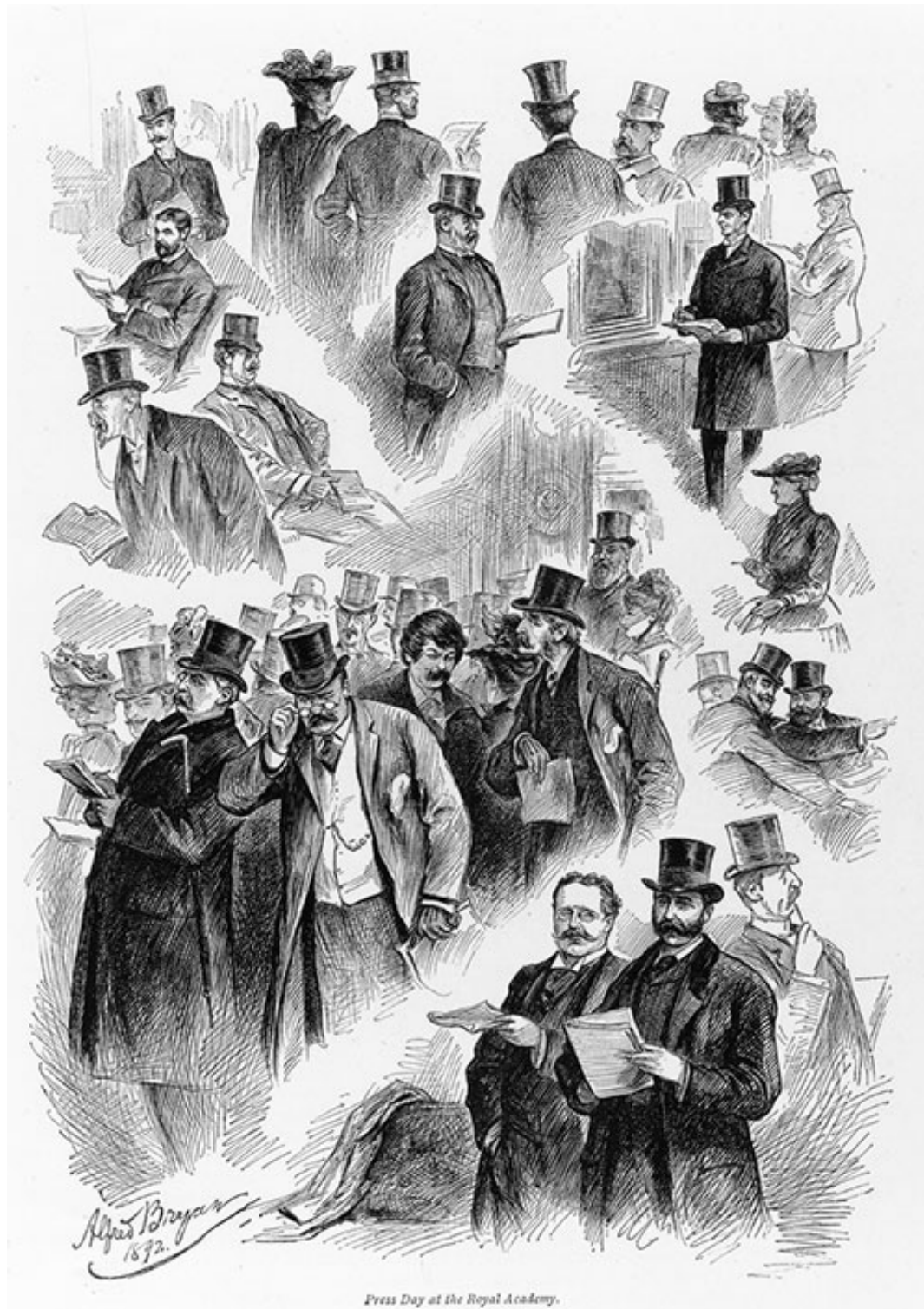


Figure 1: "Art Critics of Today", *\_Art Journal\_*, 1892

The illustration that accompanied the article included portraits of women art critics, all of them fashionably attired, gliding around a gallery in groups or singly, clutching in their hands the crucial accessory for all critics: the catalogue (Aliquis; Clarke, *Critical Voices*, 1-9).

### Artist Celebrities

The art press specifically cultivated a late Victorian fascination with biography. The "life and letters" format



appeared in article series and also as luxuriously illustrated *Art Annuals* for the *Art Journal*. Like the great tomes of the period, these were often hagiographic, and crucial for building the artists' reputations since they carried extensive reproductions of artists' works. The celebrity status of artists and their personality cults grew as portraits, photographs and "peeps" into artist's studios were revealed to a reading public (Codell 45-71). Many women writers highlighted the professional and financial status of Royal Academicians, many of whom were living in palatial studios in the leafy suburbs of Leighton House and Holland Park (Campbell; Dakers).

The art writer and poet, Alice Meynell, was responsible for the 1893 volume on the Pre-Raphaelite artist, William Holman Hunt, along with Archdeacon Farrar. Farrar provided the religious interpretation of Hunt's work while Meynell provided the "studio" biography. By this point, Hunt himself was concerned with the reputation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Specifically, he wanted to emphasize that *his* painting as opposed to that of Dante Gabriel Rossetti had retained the Brotherhood's original principles. In the *Art Annual*, Meynell gave credence to Hunt's Pre-Raphaelite pre-eminence by presenting the longevity of his oeuvre (1848-1893). She did so by including a somewhat bizarre re-enactment photograph of Hunt in his garden, at his easel, painting the *Scapegoat* in the Holy Land, a work he had completed forty years earlier. See Fig. 2.



Figure 2: "Holman Hunt in the Holy Land," *Art Annual*, 1893

Meynell's volume thus placed Hunt on the same level as the Royal Academicians who had featured in *Art Annuals*. Moreover, her status as a renowned art writer lent critical authority to a Hunt-centred account of Pre-Raphaelitism in opposition to the writings on the history of the PRB by Rossetti's brother, William Michael Rossetti, and others.<sup>[1]</sup>

Similarly, Julia Cartwright became an important supporter of the artist Edward Burne-Jones towards the end of his career, actively positioning him in the *Art Journal's* series of "great artists" and thus consolidating his career as a



“new” old master (Ady). Burne-Jones, like Hunt, was associated with Pre-Raphaelitism, and remained largely peripheral to the Royal Academy. Burne-Jones exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery (the home of Aestheticism), the New Gallery and in Europe. (On the Grosvenor Gallery, see [Julie Codell, “On the Grosvenor Gallery, 1877-90.”](#)) In addition to the *Art Annual* published for Christmas 1894, Cartwright wrote several articles on Burne-Jones and her personal correspondence with the artist attests to his preoccupation with having an advocate for his work in the press (164-166). She had access to the artist’s working studio and his careful consideration of illustrations for her articles emphasized the value of art journalism for artists. An *Art Journal* article coincided with his 1893 solo exhibition at the New Gallery and in 1896 she compiled the catalogue for an exhibition of his drawings at the Fine Art Society. Burne-Jones had resigned from the Academy in 1893, and was therefore located outside it. This made him especially intent on cultivating a good rapport with Cartwright. He benefited from having a confidante in the press who was willing to explicate the mysterious symbolism of his work.

The battle artist Elizabeth Thompson Butler was extraordinarily fortunate to have a publicist, writing, often pseudonymously, on her behalf. Butler had narrowly missed appointment to the Royal Academy in 1877 and was one of the many later Victorian artists who were regularly cited as “great women” in arguments favouring female suffrage. Butler’s correspondence with her sister, Meynell, indicates their reciprocal attention to exhibitions and art world events. Moreover, by the 1890s Meynell occupied an elite status within Victorian literary circles and shared her sister’s unease with British imperial policies. Butler had travelled to Egypt and South Africa with her husband General William Butler. Meynell’s emphasis on the humanity in her sister’s work revealed the anti-imperialist viewpoints of their liberal Catholic family circle (Usherwood and Spencer-Smith 79-84). Butler’s reputation warranted her appearance in an *Art Annual* in 1898, which was authored by none other than Meynell’s husband Wilfrid, who was also a journalist. Meynell wrote a number of provocative works about the roles of women and went on to become very involved in the suffrage movement.

Another woman who became tremendously vocal in pen and platform was the journalist Florence Fenwick-Miller. Trained in medicine and an early member of the London School Board, Fenwick-Miller had shifted to journalism, writing a regular ladies’ column for the *Illustrated London News*. She was a tireless campaigner for women’s rights and gave extensive coverage to women artists. Throughout the Victorian period, women were entirely absent from membership of the British Royal Academy, despite the two female founding members Angelica Kauffman and Mary Moser. Fenwick-Miller made repeated calls for the election of women artists like Elizabeth Butler, Henrietta Rae and Louise Jopling as members (Fenwick-Miller, “The Ladies’ Column” 478).

For Fenwick-Miller, the portrait artist Jopling epitomised beauty and fashionability. Jopling’s appearances at exhibition openings and her studio open houses were regularly highlighted in Fenwick-Miller’s column. More recently scholars have documented the public function of artists’ studios during this period, especially for Show Sunday, an important day in the social calendar preceding the spring exhibition, wherein carriages would be lined up around the block outside the home of Frederic Leighton, President of the Royal Academy (Dakers 2-4). For women artists such as Jopling, Studio Sunday was equally crucial. Contrary to received accounts of middle-class domestic interiors becoming increasingly private and segregated in the late-Victorian and Edwardian period, these spaces hosted multiple public functions (Walker 182; Hamlett 45-50). Jopling’s studio functioned as a space for work, publicity and entertaining, and by the 1890s it had an added function as a meeting place for suffrage mobilization. Like Fenwick-Miller, Jopling was a keen suffragist who successfully campaigned for equal rights for women members of the Society of Portrait Painters.

In the *Art Journal*, Fenwick-Miller contributed “Art in the Woman’s Section of the Chicago Exhibition,” a review of the Columbian Exhibition of 1893, where the murals of Mary Cassatt, Annie Swynnerton and Anna Lea Merritt could be seen. But Fenwick-Miller also addressed the drawbacks of gender segregation in “women-only” exhibitions. Nonetheless, her egalitarian feminist position shifted when the artist Henrietta Rae organised the women’s Victorian Era exhibition at Earl’s Court in 1897. Here she claimed that for the first time a “genuine display was available that showed the best work by the best women artists” (Fenwick-Miller, “Women’s Pictures at the Victorian Exhibition, Earl’s Court: Interview with Henrietta Rae” 19-20). Her interview with Rae highlighted the latter’s affiliation with Royal Academy circles and the artist’s proclivity for painting expansive nudes in a neo-classical style, on a par with the President of the Royal Academy Frederic Leighton.

## Impressionism: Newlyn, London and Glasgow



Although Meynell was certainly a firm supporter of her sister, an academic artist, she also wrote two early articles—"A Brighton Treasure-House" and "Pictures from the Hill Collection"—on the Brighton collector of French impressionist works, Captain Henry Hill. Hill's collection included British landscape artists, but also works by Monet and Degas. In 1889, Meynell turned her attention to a new group of artists influenced by this work.

The "Newlyn" artists—Stanhope Forbes, Elizabeth Armstrong, Walter Langley, Adrian Stokes and Marianne Preindlsburger Stokes—had retreated to Cornwall, in order to escape London and paint *en plein air* by the sea. Meynell is credited with giving the label, the "Newlyn School" to the group, who although quite diverse, were united in their experience of studying in France. Their style of painting was not academic, and they initially exhibited as part of the New English Art Club. Not only did these artists deploy new methods of painting out of doors, but they also used a "square brush" technique, instead of elaborate under-drawing and studio work. Meynell's article series on "Newlyn" brought the group to the attention of *Art Journal* readers. She continued her support of the group in the 1890s as some of their members gained acceptance in the Royal Academy.

Another artist associated with modern French painting, John Singer Sargent, also benefited from Meynell's support. She was among the critics who acclaimed his painting *Carnation, Lily, Lily Rose* when it was purchased for the British nation in 1887. This was a moment of change in the expectations of British critics and the academy that was to be pivotal in the history of British modernism (Helmreich, 434). Meynell continued to promote his work and the significance of her role as a critic is attested to in a portrait he did of her in 1894 (National Portrait Gallery, London). In the elongated pencil sketch, Meynell stands in a loosely draped "Aesthetic" dress, eschewing tight corseting, with a high collar and fashionable leg-of-mutton sleeves. Her hands are clasped while her dark eyes return the gaze of the viewer. The placement of the picture on the wall of Meynell's home signalled to visitors the importance of the artist-critic relationship. Their collaboration culminated in a 1903 luxury portfolio of reproductions of Sargent's portraits of other artists, writers and celebrities. Meynell wrote the accompanying essay and her portrait was among those included; it was further reproduced to accompany collections of her own work, *The Work of John S. Sargent, R.A.*). See Fig. 3.







Figure 3: John Singer Sargent, sketch of Alice Meynell (née Thompson), 1894 (pencil, 14 1/4 in. x 8 1/4 in., 362 mm x 210 mm, © National Portrait Gallery, London)

The New English Art Club, founded in 1886, also exhibited works by two other groups of artists influenced by French methods. In the press, these “modern” methods of painting found supporters among writers who came to be known as the New Critics. Among these writers was the American, Elizabeth Robins Pennell, who became a regular art columnist for both the London *Star* and New York *Nation*, writing pseudonymously as A.U. and N.N. In both these papers, she expressed support for the London Impressionists, who included Walter Sickert, Philip Wilson Steer and Sidney Starr, and the Glasgow Boys, which included James Guthrie, John Lavery and E. A. Hornel. Moreover, she repeatedly opposed academic painting and the Royal Academy. When a dispute arose in 1893 concerning the exhibition of Degas’s *L’Absinthe* at the Grafton Gallery, she targeted the pseudonymous “Philistine” (J. A. Spender) who decried the moral depravity of the piece (Robins and Thomson, 208-211; Flint 3-8).

Robins Pennell was also affiliated with a group of ex-patriot Americans in London. Among them was the artist James McNeill Whistler. Robins Pennell wrote a laudatory piece on his 1892 exhibition at the Goupil Gallery entitled *Nocturnes, Marines and Chevalet Pieces*, in which she declared he was an Impressionist “before the name Impressionism had been heard” (N. N.). Just like Sargent’s portrayal of Meynell, Whistler’s lithographic portrait of Robins Pennell offers visual evidence of the significant role Pennell played as a critic for Whistler. The piece, depicting her seated in front of a fire with strongly contrasting flickering light and shadow, was included in an exhibition of Whistler’s prints at the Fine Art Society in 1895 (Fig. 4).





Figure 4: James McNeill Whistler, Firelight: Elizabeth Robins Pennell (1896, Library of Congress)

Robins Pennell continually condemned the poor showing of "black and white" or print artists at the Royal Academy and the fact that Whistler's work was not represented in London collections. Whistler's work had not been selected for the nation as part of the Chantrey Bequest. Whistler reciprocated this support in 1897 when



Robins Pennell and her printmaker husband Joseph Pennell became embroiled in a libel case against the artist Walter Sickert (Clarke, "Seeing in Black-and-White" 581-587). Robins Pennell became a lifelong memorialiser of Whistler's work; she wrote a two-volume biography, *The Life of James McNeill Whistler* in 1908 and put together the Whistler collection in the Library of Congress.

### Beyond Britain

Robins Pennell's writings contributed to a transatlantic assessment of modernism, but this was in part informed by her travels in Europe. Robins Pennell's fame for travelling by bicycle made her an archetypal example of a New Woman. She published essays and volumes about her cycling adventures around Europe in the 1880s and 1890s, including most extraordinarily *Over the Alps on a Bicycle* in 1898 (Pennell, *Over the Alps on a Bicycle*). Fluent in French, she also regularly travelled back and forth to Paris during this period in order to review exhibitions. Travel was an important aspect of art criticism. First, to see art works first hand was considered the only way in which one could become an authority on art, and secondly the art world was becoming increasingly internationalised through exhibitions, the art market and the art press. Foreign correspondents became a vital aspect of art reviewing. For example, the art magazine *Studio*, founded in 1893, had regular correspondents, usually pseudonymous, from European centres like Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Dresden, Milan and Venice.

Several women art writers actually lived in Europe, demonstrating a cultural engagement with wider geographies. Helen Zimmern exemplified this transnationalism. She offered readers access to a diversity of cultures. Her multilingualism allowed her to publish in British, German and Italian presses and her writing was remarkable in its breadth. Her work on the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer led to a friendship with Frederic Nietzsche and she even translated his work. She also translated from French Ferdowsi's *Epic of Kings* or *Shahnameh*, which narrates the mythical and historical reign of 50 Persian Kings. Her work was an adaptation into early modern English illustrated by the Royal Academician Laurens Alma Tadema. In her introduction to the epic, Zimmern on the one hand amplified an imperial political context, citing Britain as the greatest European power in the East. On the other hand, she presented a cultural encounter aimed at resuscitation, emphasizing the importance of the "beauties" of Persian literary heritage, as counterparts to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. |

For the project, Alma Tadema made an unusual shift from his customary ancient Roman subject matter in the accompanying etching of the meeting of *Zal and Rudabeh* in Kabul (Fig. 5).



Figure 5: Alma Tadema, *Zal and Rudابه*, etching, 1882 (148 mm x 203 mm, © Trustees of the British Museum)

The Orientalised Babylonian interpretation of the epic was adapted from an Assyrian scene of King Ashurbanipal and his wife from Nineveh (c. 645 BCE, British Museum). The furniture also bears similarities to the Persian-style divan depicted in his daughter Anna Alma Tadema's watercolour of the family drawing room (Calloway, Orr, and Whittaker 9; R. J. Barrow 91).<sup>[1]</sup> A Victorian copy of an Assyrian relief and Zimmern's seemingly contradictory interpretation conjoin to reveal the complicated nature of cultural exchange during this period (MacLeod 3–4; Codell, *Transculturation in British Art, 1770-1930* 1-17). Whilst tensions continued to emerge between cultural and political agendas in the Near East (Malley 3), Zimmern reflected a mounting concern for the preservation of global heritage.

Her endeavour to popularise the epic for an English readership was successful with subsequent cheaper editions in the 1880s and 1890s. This early collaboration was equally propitious for Alma Tadema: Zimmern became his chief biographer, publishing articles, an *Art Annual* and a later monograph on the artist, *Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema, R. A.* However, her interests were not limited to Royal Academicians. Resident in Florence by the 1890s, Zimmern wrote extensively on contemporary Italian artists, and was an early promoter of the most avant-garde work by the Italian painter, Giovanni Segantini. Zimmern offered a challenging analysis of Segantini's new symbolist paintings for *Magazine of Art* readers (Zimmern, "Giovanni Segantini" 31; Clarke, "Critical Mediators" 232-233). Her prolific career indicates the importance of women as translators and cultural mediators by 1894, introducing both British and European readers to artists and cultures outside their immediate purview.

## Conclusion





In conclusion, the 1890s were an extremely productive period for women art critics. They achieved substantial professional recognition through new organisations and in their dealings with artists, editors and publishers. It was economically viable to pursue art writing as a profession; work as newspaper columnists guaranteed a regular income for Meynell, Fenwick- Miller and Robins Pennell. Allegiances with specific artists led to the production of additional artist biographies in the form of articles and volumes, it also indicated the weight of their authority in the art world. In 1894, women art writers offered a multiplicity of voices: some wrote histories of Pre-Raphaelitism and Royal Academicians, while others intently worked towards an increased recognition of women artists such as Elizabeth Thomson Butler, Henrietta Rae and Louise Jopling. Moreover, critics such as Meynell and Robins Pennell became crucial advocates of groups—like the Newlyn School and Glasgow Boys—associated with modern art in Britain, as well as individual artists such as Sargent and Whistler. As cross-channel travel became available to many more people, the market expanded for wider geographical expertise in art criticism. Experience of travel and translation was invaluable for art writers; many women capitalised on this development. By acting as cultural intermediaries from Europe and beyond, women such as Zimmern articulated a growing internationalism in the art press. Although not necessarily adhering to the stereotype of the New Woman evident in the pages of *Punch* in 1894, women art writers made crucial interventions in the contemporary art world.

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### ENDNOTES

[1] Hunt would go on to write an autobiography in 1905.

[2] The North Palace at Nineveh was excavated by H. Rassam in 1853. See also Anna Alma Tadema, *The Drawing Room*, Townshend House, 10th September 1885, watercolour over pencil and pen and ink on card, 272 x 187 mm, RAC.

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