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«POPPIES, LILIES, POETS AND POTATOES»: AN INITIAL
EXPLORATION OF AESTHETICISM AND ITS IMPACT ON THE
OPERETTAS OF GILBERT & SULLIVAN

This study proffers an initial exploration of the impact that the Aesthetic movement had upon the music, lyrics and costumes which featured in the operas created by Sir William Schwenk Gilbert (1836-1911) and Sir Arthur Seymour Sullivan (1842-1900). It will focus specifically on the production of *Patience* during its initial staging at the Opera Comique in London, in April 1881, and subsequent transfer to the Savoy Theatre in October of the same year. Particular attention will be paid to the costumes worn by the leading performers and the relationship between these theatrical garments and the clothing worn by, and associated with, followers of the movement.

'Aesthetes' as they were known, were united by the proclamation «Art for Art's Sake» (translated from the French «L'Art pour L'Art»). This motto, generally credited to the French writer and critic Théophile Gautier (1811–1872), expressed the philosophy that «art should exist for no reason, other than to be beautiful».¹ Although the origins of the Aesthetic movement have been traced back to the late 1860s, the peak of its influence was during the 1870s and 1880s. The impact of Aestheticism can be seen not simply in the artwork produced during this decade, but across all art forms, including literature and, as this chapter will discuss, theatrical productions. The most committed adherents to the movement also sought to design their homes and their clothing in accordance with this search for beauty, and these distinctive styles marked out the Aesthetes from their contemporaries.²

Patience was written when Aestheticism was at its height and many of the individuals who featured in the operetta would have been immediately recognizable as caricatures of some of the more famous promoters of the principles and attire associated with the Aesthetic movement. The 'fleshy poet' Reginald Bunthorne for instance, has been identified by many critics as an exaggerated representation of the painter James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) whilst Bunthorne's rival, the handsome Archibald Grosvenor, owed many elements of his dress and attitudes to the poet and essayist Oscar Wilde (1854–

¹ Director's Foreword, in *The Cult of Beauty: The Aesthetic Movement 1869-1900*, eds. Stephen Calloway and Lynn Federle Orr, London, V&A Publishing, 2011, p. 9.

² On the Aesthetic movement see *The Cult of Beauty*, cit.; CHARLOTTE GERE, *Artistic Circles: Design & Decoration in the Aesthetic Movement*, London, V&A Publishing, 2010; LIONEL LAMBOURNE, *The Aesthetic Movement*, London, Phaidon, 1996; STELLA MARY NEWTON, *Health, Art and Reason: Dress Reformers of the 19th Century*, London, John Murray, 1974.

1900).³ As this study will discuss, the Aesthetic movement was still flourishing four years after the premiere of *Patience* and continued to provide Gilbert with ideas for his librettos. In 1885 it was the movement's veneration of 'all things Japanese' which inspired one of the partnership's most famous works, *The Mikado*.

WHO WERE GILBERT AND SULLIVAN?

Though the longstanding appeal of the operas created by Gilbert and Sullivan is testament in part to the timelessness of their work, it is clear that the popularity of Gilbert's librettos among a nineteenth-century audience owed much to the topicality of the subject matter. This was particularly true for productions such as *Patience* and *The Mikado* which reflect a growing trend towards satirizing the Aesthetic movement, evident in contemporary publications such as *Punch* and the *Illustrated London News*. Aesthetes were by no means the only social group which Gilbert sought to satirize, however. *Trial by Jury* (1875) and *Iolanthe* (1882), for instance, provided an ideal means through which to encourage audiences to mock, and question, the privileges enjoyed by the upper classes and higher ranking members of the legal system and *Princess Ida* (1884) engaged with the widespread fear, and condemnation of, the educated and emancipated 'new women'.

Gilbert and Sullivan had first worked together in 1871 on a novelty piece for the Gaiety Theatre called *Thespis* which ran for 63 performances. It was not until 1875, however, that they were to collaborate again. The driving force behind this second collaboration was Richard D'Oyly Carte (1844-1901), the man who would go on to found the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company with which the operas have become synonymous and who would provide the pair with essential financial and practical support. The second opera produced by Gilbert and Sullivan was *Trial by Jury*. First staged at the Royalty Theatre, it was revived in both 1876 and 1877 by which point it had been performed over three hundred times. This piece marked the beginning of a partnership which, whilst often tense and always argumentative, was nevertheless extraordinarily productive and successful: enduring for over twenty years.

The contribution that each partner made to a piece appears to have been very clearly delineated, with Gilbert working on the libretto which Sullivan would then set to music, adding an overture for both acts and often conducting the orchestra, particularly on opening nights and for significant performances.

In addition to the music composed for the operas he created with Gilbert, Sullivan wrote, amongst other works, cantatas, oratorios, concert overtures, incidental music for plays, numerous songs and a grand opera, *Ivanhoe*, which premiered at the Royal Opera House in 1891. He was the conductor of the Leeds Festival for almost twenty years and was knighted in 1883. As William A. Darlington records, through his career Sullivan

³ ALISON ADBURGHAM, *Liberty's: A Biography of a Shop*, London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1975, pp. 30-31.

[...] had been told again and again by severe critics in solemn journals that he owed it to his genius and to his position in society to write serious music [...] and he firmly believed, that in spending so much of his best years writing lucrative but flimsy and short lived stuff like comic opera, he was prostituting his art.⁴

Sullivan's sense that his work with Gilbert was preventing him from fulfilling his true potential as a musician often threatened to destroy their partnership. Indeed, as Stedman's research into Sullivan's diaries revealed, on the day after the premiere of *Patience* Sullivan told D'Oyly Carte that «he would collaborate once more with Gilbert, but after that he intended to do a grand opera for Covent Garden».⁵

It is clear from Gilbert's own remarks, not least his description of Sullivan as «incomparably the greatest English musician of the age», that Gilbert had a great respect for the talent of his collaborator.⁶ When the pair had first been introduced, Gilbert was already established as a dramatist with a number of straight plays to his credit and a reputation for an odd kind of topsy-turvy humor peculiar to himself, which had been seen both in his comedies and also in the verses he wrote for a weekly paper called *Fun*.⁷ Gilbert's principal contribution to the operas they created was of course the libretto. It appears, however, that Gilbert's involvement in the production of their work extended far beyond the writing of the story and lyrics. Descriptions of rehearsals suggest that he actually took on a role comparable to that of a 'stage director' and used to arrive «with every stage move already clear in his mind, having worked them out with wooden blocks – one size for men, another, slightly smaller, for women – in a model theatre at home».⁸

In the case of *Patience* Gilbert's role expanded to encompass that of costume designer, as although he initially wanted the cartoonist George Du Maurier (1834-1896) to design the costumes and considered the artist Walter Crane (1845-1915) as set designer, he eventually chose to take responsibility for the designs himself and to employ John O'Connor (1830-1889), who had previously worked for the D'Oyly Carte company, to create the set.⁹

THE AESTHETIC WORLD

If you ask nine tenths of the British public what is the meaning of the word 'aesthetics' they will tell

⁴ WILLIAM A. DARLINGTON, *The World Of Gilbert and Sullivan*, London, Peter Nevill Ltd., 1951, p. 14.

⁵ JANE STEDMAN, *W.S. Gilbert, A Classic Victorian and His Theatre*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 185.

⁶ The quote appears in the Online archive for the Gilbert and Sullivan society. Accessed via the following [LINK](#)

⁷ WILLIAM A. DARLINGTON, *The World Of Gilbert and Sullivan*, cit., pp. 16-17.

⁸ *Ivi*, pp. 33-34.

⁹ JANE STEDMAN, *W.S. Gilbert*, cit., p. 183.

you it is the French for 'affectation' or the German for a 'dado'.¹⁰

As previously discussed, late-nineteenth-century audience members would have been familiar with satirical cartoons of Aesthetes, such as those of the *Cimabue Brown's* (a couple desperately trying, and failing, to live up to their Aesthetic Ideals), which George Du Maurier created for *Punch*. Gilbert could therefore design costumes that made direct and deliberate reference not only to these satirical depictions of Aesthetes, but also the Aesthetes themselves. Before commencing a detailed analysis of the costumes which featured in the 1881 production, it is necessary to establish the context required to appreciate, and understand, the visual humor of Gilbert's designs.

AESTHETIC HOUSES AND THE ARTIST'S STUDIO

The full impact and extent of the Aesthetic movement has been widely discussed and explored elsewhere, most recently in the 2011 exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum (hereafter V&A) *The Cult of Beauty*, curated by Stephen Calloway at the V&A and Dr Lynn Federle Orr at The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

As Calloway commented in the book which accompanied the exhibition:

Earlier notions, nurtured during the Romantic era, of the artist as wild, unfettered genius were gradually mediated by the very different aims of the emerging Aesthetic movement which sought to redefine the artist primarily as a super-sensitive seeker after ideal beauty. Artists engaged in the creation of this new kind of exquisite art had a need, it was held, to look constantly upon beauty, to surround themselves only with exquisite things [...].¹¹

Fortunately for researchers, a wide range of images depicting the interiors of 'Aesthetic Houses' from this period have survived to the present day. These range from the exaggerated array of 'blue and white china', lilies, sunflowers and painted screens which featured in satirical cartoons such as *An Infelicitous Question*,¹² to the simple and practical interior evident in Edward Godwin's (1833-1886) designs for 'The White House', 35, Tite Street, London, 1877. Many paintings from the period also show the houses and studios inhabited by leading members of the movement. These include Whistler's *The Artist in his studio* (1865-6), now at the Art Institute of Chicago, which depicts a simple, Japanese inspired interior, and represents a stark contrast to the oriental splendor of *The Drawing Room, Townsend House*, 1883, at the Royal Academy of

¹⁰ OSCAR WILDE, *The English Renaissance of Art*, (public lecture first delivered in 1882, subsequently reprinted in *Essays and Lectures by Oscar Wilde*, London, Methuen and Co., 1908.

¹¹ STEPHEN CALLOWAY, *The Palace of Art: Artists Collections and their Houses*, in *The Cult of Beauty*, cit., p. 90

¹² GEORGE DU MAURIER, *English Society*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1897, available at the following [LINK](#)

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Art, painted by Laura Alma Tadema (1852-1909) and depicting the home shared with her husband, the artist Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema (1836-1912). A compromise between these two extremes may perhaps be seen in the Henry Treffry Dunn's 1882 painting of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) in the sitting room of his home, Tudor House, 16 Cheyne Walk, London. The image contains few examples of the 'blue and white china' collected by many of the members of the movement (pieces from Rossetti's extensive collections now survive in the V&A, London), though a vase might just be visible on the mantelpiece, next to the smaller of the two mirrors which dominate the room. It also offers a sense of the color palette favored by the movement and of Rossetti's personal predilection for «old chests and cabinets, Chinese hardwood furniture and other oriental pieces».¹³

«GREENERY, YALLERY GROSVENOR GALLERY»

Set up in part to compete with what they felt to be the outmoded approach of the Royal Academy, in particular its exclusive Summer Shows, the opening of the Grosvenor Gallery in 1877 marked «a turning point in the fortunes of the cult of Aestheticism as it moved from a matter of elite, private display to a public celebration of the arts».¹⁴

Established by George III in 1768, The Royal Academy of Arts had come to dominate art and artistic taste in London. In direct defiance of the Academy's 'Summer Exhibition', in which aspiring artists competed to have their works displayed on walls so overcrowded that paintings were often barely visible, the founders of the Grosvenor Gallery aspired to create a gallery where

pictures would be treated as pictures and not as postage stamps...Here would be seen the works of painters who, finding the crowded walls of the Academy do little justice to their pictures, had left off exhibiting for many years. Strange names were whispered – Rossetti, Madox Brown, Burne Jones.¹⁵

This was, as Robertson declared, «a genuine offering at the shrine of Beauty, a gallant blow struck in the cause of Art».¹⁶

Sketches of the opening of the Grosvenor Gallery, which appeared in *The Illustrated London News* and *The Graphic* in 1877, and William Powell Frith's famous painting of *The Private View at the Royal Academy* (1881) [Private Collection], give a sense of the contrasting approach of these two competing galleries. Whereas the paintings displayed beneath the soaring arched ceilings of the Grosvenor Gallery are widely spaced and positioned in the center of the walls, at the most two high, the walls of the Royal Academy are overcrowded, the pictures displayed above, alongside, and beneath one another, and covering

¹³ STEPHEN CALLOWAY, *The Palace of Art*, cit., p. 103

¹⁴ BARBARA BRYANT, *The Grosvenor Gallery, Patronage and the Aesthetic Portrait*, in *The Cult of Beauty*, cit., p. 177

¹⁵ WALFORD GRAHAM ROBERTSON, *Time Was*, London, Hutchinson, 1931, p. 45

¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 46.

their surface almost from floor to ceiling. Frith's painting is of interest not simply as a record of these Summer Exhibitions, but also because of the illustration it provides of the contrast between the fashions associated with the Aesthetic movement.

Amongst the figures invited to the private view is the poet Oscar Wilde, shown wearing a black silk top hat and brown velvet coat with wide lapels. Wilde is not the only, nor the most distinctive, figure in Aesthetic dress; positioned to his right is a woman in a salmon pink frock with a box pleated train known as the 'Watteau back', a style particularly favored by female Aesthetes. To the left of the portrait a young girl wears a dress in a style known as a 'Kate Greenaway Dress', a name and style of children's clothing inspired by the illustrations produced by the artist Kate Greenaway (1846-1901).

The impact and notoriety of the Grosvenor Gallery was such that one of the songs from *Patience* made a direct reference to it:

a greenery yallery, Grosvenor Gallery,
Foot in the grave young man.¹⁷

The phrase «greenery yallery» alludes not only to the green and gold walls of the Gallery itself, but also to the muted tones of the natural dyes and woolen based fabrics favored by wearers of Aesthetic dress. Many such Aesthetes obtained fabrics and decorative accessories for their homes from Liberty's Department Store, and may well have included one of Liberty's famous 'Umritza Cashmere Shawls' amongst their purchases. As a journalist for *The Queen* magazine in 1879 wrote, amongst the many green and mustard tints in which «those who indulge in artistic dress or decorative revivals» could obtain «these durable, yet deliciously soft, shawls» were «sage green, willow green, [...and] greens that are remarkable on lichen coloured walls, and also among marshy vegetation».¹⁸

A dress made for a member of the Liberty family and now in the collection of the V&A also exemplifies the «greenery yallowy» tones which are ridiculed in this song [Museum Number T.56-1976]. The 'tea gown' worn for informal meetings 'at home' or perhaps even as a simple dinner dress has a deep green velvet overdress with a high cross-over bodice and a deep yellow silk underdress with long, puffed sleeves. The silk for another rich yellow/golden dress in the Aesthetic style, from circa 1897, has even been woven with the sunflower motif adopted by the movement.¹⁹ Though deep blues and red could be achieved with natural dyes, Aesthetic dress was often associated with muted

¹⁷ WILLIAM S. GILBERT AND ARTHUR SULLIVAN, *An entirely New and Original Aesthetic Opera in Two Acts Entitled Patience of Bunthorne's Bride*, London, Chapell & Co, 1881, n.n. References to this text shall hereafter be abbreviated to Libretto, *Patience*, accessed online, via Internet Archive: [LINK](#)

¹⁸ ALISON ADBURGHAM, *Liberty's*, cit., p. 31.

¹⁹ Images of all the items referred to from the V&A Collections can be found via the museum's online catalogue, 'Search the Collections'. Available via [LINK](#). Links to the relevant items will be provided. In this instance the item has been allocated the Museum Number T.57-1976 and can be found at the following [LINK](#)

'foot in the grave' tones. Again a dress from the V&A collections provides an example of this somber color palette. It consists of a sleeveless brown ribbed wool overdress, similar to a fitted tunic of pinafore and is worn over a brown pleated silk underdress with a high collar and full, puffed sleeves.²⁰

AESTHETIC DRESS

As Frith's painting of *The Private View at the Royal Academy* showed, many of those who wished to associate themselves with the Aesthetic movement adopted specific styles of dress to demonstrate their allegiance with its values. Handbooks such as *The Art of Beauty* (1878) and *Art as Applied to Dress* (1885) were produced, and provided their readers with guidance on the most flattering styles and colors for those who wished to dress Aesthetically. As Edwina Erhman found,

In the 1870s women wishing to dress artistically were recommended to look for inspiration in paintings, particularly those of the Pre-Raphaelite artists, and in books about period costume where they would find attractive sleeve details and decorative combinations of colours and fabrics.²¹

Surviving photographs, sketches and paintings offer an indication of the styles of dress adopted by figures associated with the movement. Both the artist Walter Crane and his wife Mary Frances Crane (active 1886) adopted Aesthetic dress and the frontispiece entitled 'My Lady's Chamber', which Crane produced in 1881, includes a wonderful image of the pale blue dresses with their swathed skirts and 'smocked' detailing on the sleeves and at the collar, which were sold by Liberty's.²² Indeed a dress in a remarkably similar style and color survives in the collections of the V&A.²³ Made from blue pongee silk and trimmed with smocking and machine made lace, it was created by Liberty & Co. in circa 1895.

The image of the Countess Brownlow (1845-1917) painted by the artist Sir Frederick Leighton (1830-1896) depicts a dress which incorporates many of the historically inspired styles which were such a distinctive feature of Aesthetic dress. The vast swathes of fabric visible in the layered skirt and the full, three quarter length sleeves of her gown owe their origins to the faux medieval period often depicted in Pre-Raphaelite art, whilst the bodice, raised slightly above the natural level to a point slightly below the bust, echoes 'The Empire Line' style which was particularly associated with the Regency Period (circa 1800-1815). As Erhman's comments implied, the link between Art and Dress was deliberately cultivated and promoted by wearers of Aesthetic dress, many of whom drew directly upon features of classical statuary and medieval art when designing

²⁰ Museum number T.31&A-1987, accessible via the following [LINK](#)

²¹ DWINA ERHMAN, *Women's Dress*, in *The Cult of Beauty*, cit., p. 207.

²² Crane's frontispiece was created to illustrate an edition of Clarence Cook's (1828-1900) *The House Beautiful*. This book, first published in 1879, was a compilation of essays which Cook (who was strongly influenced by the values of the British Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood) had written on home furnishings for the journal *Scribner's Monthly*.

²³ [Museum Number T.17-1985] accessible via [LINK](#)

their clothing. Evidence relating to the purchasing patterns of Aesthetic dressers, such as the female poets 'Michael Field', for instance, suggests that wearers of Aesthetic dress often patronized specific dress makers and hatters who could be relied upon to produce clothing and accessories in sympathy with Aesthetic, rather than mainstream, fashions.²⁴

«EVERYDAY YOUNG GIRLS»

One of the reasons that Aesthetic dress attracted such extensive ridicule and criticism was the degree to which it departed from styles and colors which typified the dress of the period. The silhouette fashionable in the mid 1870s and early 1880s relied upon a tightly laced corset to achieve a narrow waist and uplifted bosom.²⁵ A bustle, or 'dress improver' as it was decorously termed, was also required to support the layered skirts which projected at the rear of the dress. The design and size of bustles varied across this period with the lighter styles generally incorporated into a cotton petticoat or crinolette, or attached to a cotton waistband, whilst more exaggerated bustles consisted of layers of increasingly wide, stiff, pads stuffed with horsehair.²⁶ The majority of dresses were covered with contrasting and complex layers of trimming and the vivid purples and blues that could be achieved with the chemical (aniline) dyes discovered in the 1850s were still extremely fashionable, forming a stark contrast to the subtle, natural shades of ochre and indigo favored by Aesthetes. Whilst surviving examples of Aesthetic dress do reveal evidence that 'boning' or steel supports were often used to create shape in bodices, many Aesthetes rejected not only the uncomfortable bustles but also constricting corsets and relied upon pleats and tucks to add subtle shaping to their garments.

«A NEW AESTHETIC OPERA»

The «New Aesthetic Opera», *Patience or Bunthorne's Bride*, opened at the Opera Comique on the 24th of April 1881. This emphasis of the novelty of the piece did not pass unnoticed among the critics, who were quick to point out that this was not the first dramatic production inspired by the new craze for Aestheticism. Indeed, by June of 1881 (just two months after *Patience* had opened) the *Saturday Review* declared: «Already no chorus is complete in any

²⁴ Michael Field was a pseudonym used for the poetry and verse drama of Katherine Harris Bradley (1846 –1914) and her niece and ward Edith Emma Cooper (1862 –1913). Research into their receipts and diaries carried out by Dr Ana Parejo Vadillo has revealed details of the clothing they commissioned from their favorite dressmakers, Miss Vickers and Louie Ellis, and also of the extravagant hats produced for them by the designer, Madame Verena. See ANA PAREJO VADILLO, *Living Art: Michael Field, Aestheticism and Dress*, in *Crafting the Woman Professional in the Long Nineteenth Century: Artistry and Industry in Britain*, Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi and Patricia Zakreski eds., Farnham, Surrey, Ashgate, 2013; SARAH PARKER, *Fashioning Michael Field: Michael Field and Late-Victorian Dress Culture* «Journal of Victorian Culture», 2013, pp. 1-22.

²⁵ See Museum Number T.84&A-1980, V&A, accessible online via the following [LINK](#)

²⁶ See Museum Number T.775C-1913, V&A, accessible online via [LINK](#) and Museum Number T.69-1980, V&A accessible online via [LINK](#)

new farce without a pale faced, long haired young man, with his hat on the back of his head and a flower as big as a frying pan in his hand».²⁷

A review of the production printed in *The Referee* commented on the text of the playbills themselves, in particular the fact that

Mr Gilbert [was] careful to announce in the playbills, that the Libretto was completed as early as November last, probably to show that he did not take from Mr. Burnand [editor of *Punch*] the idea of dealing with aestheticism.²⁸

As these reviews indicate, the success of F.C. Burnard's (1836-1917) play, *The Colonel*, produced some two months earlier at the Prince of Wales Theatre, did call into question the originality of *Patience*. Many aspects of the plot of *The Colonel*, not least the naive young maidens easily seduced by the false lure of Aestheticism, do resonate with the storyline followed in *Patience*, and both could be said to illustrate what a reviewer in *Punch* described as «the discomfiture of the Aesthete and the triumph of common sense». Whether or not *Patience* could be said to have been following, or leading, a trend, the success of the production was such that it transferred to the newly built Savoy Theatre in October 1881. This theatre was, as advertisements proudly declared, the first theatre to be wired for electricity and despite the fact that the stage was still only illuminated by gaslight, the auditorium, much to the excitement of reviewers and audience members, was rendered dazzlingly bright by «Swans incandescent lamps».

Patience is set in the mythical environs of Castle Bunthorne and centers upon a group of young maidens who have fallen hopelessly in love with the «morbid and mystic poet» Reginald Bunthorne. Much to the despair of the maidens, Bunthorne has himself fallen in love with the village milkmaid Patience who is herself entirely indifferent to, and somewhat dismayed by, Bunthorne's urgent declarations of his love for her. Further disaster seems certain to occur when a group of Dragoons, previously engaged to these maidens, return to claim their brides and the situation is made worse by the arrival of the handsome poet Archibald Grosvenor with whom all the women, Patience included, fall instantly in love. Determined to regain the affections of their betrothed the Dragoons exchange their uniforms for Aesthetic dress and though this transformation is more comic than heroic, the sacrifice earns the love of the maidens concerned.

In response to the terrifying threats of a distraught Bunthorne, Archibald Grosvenor agrees to cut his hair and adopt the dress and manners of a commonplace young man. Seeing their hero abandon his Aesthetic attire, all the lovesick maidens follow suit and by the conclusion of the opera everyone, except Bunthorne and Lady Jane, has discarded their Aesthetic dress. All these «everyday young men and women», and even the «pretty massive» Lady Jane, find a soulmate, leaving only the false Aesthete Bunthorne alone, and forced to content himself «with a tulip or lily».²⁹

²⁷ *Saturday Review*, June, 1881.

²⁸ *The Referee*, 24 April, 1881.

²⁹ Libretto, *Patience*, Act II, p. 40.

AESTHETIC DRAPERIES

As surviving photographs of Leonora Braham (1853-1931) in the role of *Patience* reveal, even the costume worn by this blithe milkmaid makes several direct references to the styles and motifs associated with the Aesthetic movement.³⁰ Some dramatic license has been taken with the design as Braham appeared in a costume with a swathed skirt and tightly fitting bodice that was more reminiscent of a fashionable 1880s walking dress than the plain, practical printed cottons or linens that were more likely to have been worn by a working class woman, even a 'rustic' milkmaid. An equally idealized costume, however, is worn by the Haymakers in Armstrong's 1869 painting, *The Hay Field*.

From the point of view of this discussion however, the most interesting aspects of Braham's costume are the oversized flowers that were massed under the brim of her hat. A cross between daisies and sunflowers they combine elements of two flowers which, with the exception of the lily, were most closely associated with the movement. Motifs of sunflowers featured repeatedly in fireplace surrounds and on decorative furnishings, and exaggerated versions of the same flower also often appeared in the caricatures of Aesthetes, which appeared in the popular press.

LOVE SICK MAIDENS

As the review in *The Referee* explained, the action begins «with an overture more martial than aesthetic in character».³¹ The curtain rises to reveal «young Ladies» all «wearing aesthetic draperies» grouped around the stage and in front of a backdrop showing the exterior of Castle Bunthorne. A crucial distinction between *Patience* and previous productions satirizing the Aesthetic movement was, Stedman suggests, that Gilbert devised stage pictures in the styles of contemporary painters. This procession of «damozels», or «love sick maidens» with which the opera opens, for instance, recalled Leighton's *Daphnephoria* (1878), and Burne Jones's *Design from Romance of the Rose* (1881).³²

Each maiden was equipped with a lute, mandolin or other similar instrument and the stage directions instructed them to appear «in the last stage of despair».³³ A songsheet entitled 'The High Art Maiden' (Alfred Conanchen, 1880, Mary Evans Picture Library) provides an indication of the exaggerated despair and emotions that Gilbert wanted to see exhibited by these maidens. A mode of behavior in line with the caricatures of Aesthetes which ridiculed the «love of Art for Art's sake» promoted by the movement.

³⁰ See photograph of Leonora Braham as *Patience*, Department of Theatre and Performance (hereafter DTP), S.146:134-2007 and a signed photograph of Leonora Braham in the title role of *Patience* at the Opera Comique, 1881 (National Portrait Gallery Collections, London (hereafter NPG), NPG x6415).

³¹ *The Referee*, 24 April, 1881.

³² JANE STEDMAN, *W.S. Gilbert*, cit., p. 183.

³³ Libretto, *Patience*, Act I, p. 5.

In the absence of extant garments from the production, much of the analysis depends on the surviving black and white or sepia photographs of the performers. Indications of the original colors can be found however in other sources, such as color posters and also contemporary newspaper reviews.³⁴ In the complaints of the critic in *The Sporting Times*, for instance, we learn about the Pre-Raphaelite red wig and 'gaudy' blue dress worn by Jessie Bond (1852-1943) as Lady Angela, as well as the 'sickly' greens of other costumes. Further information is provided by a reviewer in *The Pall Mall Gazette*, which declared Gilbert's aesthetic costumes exquisitely beautiful, «unlike the vulgar raw reds, yellows, and blues of the chorus's dresses when they become everyday young girls».³⁵

The influence of Aesthetic paintings and subject matter on the style of Aesthetic draperies in which Gilbert chose to dress his love sick maidens, perhaps even the deliberate reference to these works, becomes immediately apparent when comparisons are made between the costumes and paintings from the period. It is for example possible to identify a particularly strong connection between sketches from the souvenir program [held in the collection of the DTP, V&A] with paintings such as *The Mill, Girls Dancing* by Edward Burne-Jones from 1870-2. Moreover, as subsequent analysis will show, Gilbert's eye for design clearly extended beyond the dresses themselves to encompass the accessories worn, and carried, by his leading ladies.

LADY ELLA, MAY FORTESCUE (1862-1950)

The parallel between the theatrical costumes and Aesthetic dress and paintings is particularly apparent in the garments worn by May Fortescue (1862-1950) as Lady Ella. Photographs which show the actress as she appeared in the 1881 production in the V&A Collections provide a sense of her costume.³⁶ Elements of this costume which are of particular interest are the detail of lilies just visible on the bodice of her dress and the bracelets she wears twined about her arms. Like her fellow maidens she carries an instrument, in this instance, a lyre.

The design of the maiden's dresses bears a particularly strong resemblance to those depicted in paintings such as *The Midday Slumbers* (1881) and *A Greek Woman* (1869) by the artist Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema (1836-1912). In the case of Lady Ella, there is an even stronger link with the artist as her bracelets may owe their inspiration to a remarkably similar piece of jewelry worn by Tadema's second wife, Laura Theresa, who was also an artist in her own right.³⁷

³⁴ All color posters referred to in this paper relate to the 1882 American Tour and digital images of the posters can be accessed via the following [LINK](#)

³⁵ JANE STEDMAN, *W.S. Gilbert*, cit., pp. 183-4.

³⁶ These images can also be found via the V&A online catalogue 'Search the Collection'. See DTP, S.146:80-2007 and S.146:83-2007 accessible online via [LINK](#) and [LINK](#)

³⁷ This armband, now in a Private Collection, was displayed in the V&A's 'Cult of Beauty' Exhibition and images can be found in the accompanying book.

LADY SAPHIR AND LADY ANGELA

Certain aspects of the costumes worn by Julia Gwynne (1856-1934) as Lady Saphir, and Jessie Bond (1853-1942) as Lady Angela are also worthy of comment. The costumes of both actresses are bordered with bands of decoration at the hem and neckline and the delicate open sleeves have been softly gathered into knots.³⁸ Motifs chosen for these decorative borders make direct reference to similar motifs that appear in examples of extant Aesthetic dress and also feature in the décor of the period.

The most obvious connection in this instance is between the Daisy Pattern from which Morris's 1864 'Daisy Wallpaper' design takes its name, and the floral or 'daisy' motif which appears on the dress of both Bond and Gwynne.³⁹ Similarly, whilst the cut of their bodices is not directly comparable to a later silk satin and chiffon dress, made by the House of Liberty, and dated to circa 1904-5, now in the collection of Platt Hall, Manchester, strong similarities can be identified between the overall design of the garments.⁴⁰

LADY JANE

Fading is the taper waist, Shapeless grows the shapely limb
And although severely laced, Spreading is the figure trim!⁴¹

The score which Sullivan wrote for the production received fulsome praise from the majority of the critics. Indeed *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* declared that

The orchestration is the most meritorious feature in the work. Here, Mr Sullivan was free to exert his powers, and the orchestral score is enriched with many charming and felicitous passages, which – delightful in themselves – sympathetically illustrate the dramatic action.⁴²

One of the songs which was singled out for particular praise was the one performed by Alice Barnett (1846-1901) in Act II, entitled 'Sad is that woman's lot'. This solo was declared «one of the funniest and most original touches in the whole piece», yet despite the comic theme and premise of this song, the quality of the orchestration was such that it was described by one critic as 'Handelian'.⁴³

³⁸ See photograph, Julia Gwynne as 'Saphir', 1881 [DTP, S.146:144-2007 and Colour poster showing 'Lady Angela and Lady Saphir', and advertising the American Tour, circa 1882.

³⁹ An image of this *Daisy Wallpaper*, Block printed in distemper colours, by William Morris in 1864 can be found via V&A Search the collection, Museum Number E.2222-1913 accessible online via the following [LINK](#)

⁴⁰ See Accession Number: 1947.4261, Platt Hall, Manchester. An image of this dress can be found by 'Searching the Collections' of Platt Hall on line, or reached directly via the following [LINK](#)

⁴¹ Lady Jane, Libretto, *Patience*, Act II, p. 26.

⁴² *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 1881.

⁴³ *Daily Telegraph*, 1881.

Barnett's costume is also of interest. Designed to support Lady Alice's description of herself as «Pretty Massive» it was cut a sleeveless tunic style which was often used for Aesthetic dress. In this instance however it is not the cut of the costume, but the bold design which dominates the front of the tunic that attracts attention.⁴⁴

The reviewer in *The Referee* provided a wonderfully apt summary of the outfit describing Miss Barnett as «a gigantic nocturne in black and peacock green». This description creates an immediate and deliberate link with the work of another leading figure in the Aesthetic movement, the artist James McNeil Whistler (1834-1903). Whistler's series of *Nocturnes*, which featured in the opening show at the Grosvenor Gallery, had become famous when they were severely condemned by the art critic Ruskin.⁴⁵ The peacock, which is at the center of this bold design, was an image particularly favored by members of the Aesthetic movement and regularly appeared in artwork and furnishing designs. The most famous example of this is perhaps *The Peacock Room* which Whistler designed at enormous expense for the London home of Frederick Richards Leyland (1832-1892) in 1878.

«AN AESTHETIC SHAM»

As can be seen from the surviving photographs, such as those of the singer George Grossmith (1847-1912) as Reginald Bunthorne, the Aesthetic dress worn by the male performers in *Patience* all followed a very similar style and design.⁴⁶ Whilst some slight deviations were made to distinguish individual characters, in the main their costumes consisted of a dark velvet jacket, close fitting knee breeches, soft 'pumps' and in most cases a soft, wide brimmed hat. It could be argued that these outfits were partially inspired by the knee breeches which characterized the male fashions of the Regency era, but it seems likely that the primary source of inspiration was the clothes adopted by male Aesthetes and followers of the associated Rational Dress movement, which advocated the healthiness of clothing which allowed freedom of movement and the beneficial effect of wearing wool next to the skin.

⁴⁴ See Photograph of Alice Barnett as Lady Jane in *Patience* at the Opera Comique. [DTP, S.146:143-2007, accessible online via [LINK](#), and Color poster showing 'Lady Jane'. America, circa 1882.

⁴⁵ See J. M. Whistler, *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket*, 1875, The Detroit Institute of Arts. In 1877, Ruskin published a letter describing an exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery which included Whistler's work. He complained in particular about *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* declaring: «I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face». Whistler decided to sue Ruskin for libel. [See [LINK](#)]

⁴⁶ See S.146:177-2007 and S.146:183-2007. Photographs of Grossmith as Bunthorne, DTP. Accessible online via [LINK](#) and [LINK](#)

ARCHIBALD GROSVENOR

These gifts – irksome as they are – were given to me for the enjoyment and delectation of my fellow-creatures. I am a trustee for Beauty.⁴⁷

Rutland Barrington (1853-1922), described by one reviewer as «an idyllic poet in black velvet with long fair hair», played the role of Grosvenor and his outfit also reflects fashions common among male Aesthetes. Yet if one examines the surviving photographs and sketches more closely,⁴⁸ it becomes clear that in this instance Grosvenor's costume, and even his dark flowing locks, seems to have been designed as an intentional reference to the mode of attire adopted by the poet and essayist Oscar Wilde. The marked similarities between Wilde's garments and Barrington's costumes can be seen when making a comparison between the stage costume and photographs taking of Wilde by Elliot and Fry London in 1881 [NPG x82203, NPG] and in the studio of Napoleon Sarony during his American tour later the following year [NPG P24 and NPG P25, NPG].⁴⁹

Though the phrases within the libretto appear to comment on Wilde and his proclivity for wearing a oversized sunflower in his buttonhole or making dramatic gestures to demonstrate his reverence for the woman heralded by the Aesthetic movement as the true embodiment of classical beauty, Lily Langtry (1853-1929), Gilbert was careful to make no direct reference to the Irishman.⁵⁰

The connection, however, would have been immediately recognizable to audiences and indeed Wilde himself. D'Oyly Carte was swift to recognize the value of cultivating the support of an individual who was becoming an increasingly influential figure within society, and agreed to finance Wilde's 1882 tour of America. In return Wilde agreed to schedule his arrival in American cities so that it would coincide with the opening of the opera, acting, as Max Beerbohm suggested, as a «sandwich board for *Patience*».⁵¹

⁴⁷ Libretto, *Patience*, Act I, p. 18.

⁴⁸ See S.146:181-2007 and S.146:190-2007, Photographs of Rutland Barrington as Archibald Grosvenor in *Patience* at the Opera Comique, DTP. These images are accessible online via [LINK](#) and [LINK](#)

⁴⁹ These images can be found on the National Portrait Gallery Website. They are accessible online via [LINK](#). See in particular: NPG x82203: [LINK](#); NPG P25: [LINK](#) and NPG P24 [LINK](#)

⁵⁰ The phrase from Bunthorne's solo in Act 1, p. 15: «If you walk down Piccadilly with a poppy or a lily in your mediaeval hand» is a case in point. Referring both to the incidents upon which Wilde had both scandalized and inspired Londoners by wearing dashing flowers in his buttonhole and simultaneously to his connection with Langtry who was popularly known as «The Jersey Lily». Libretto, *Patience*, Act I, p. 13.

⁵¹ IAN BRADLEY, *Complete Annotated Gilbert and Sullivan*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 269.

«POPPIES, LILIES, POETS AND POTATOES»

«RED AND YELLOW – PRIMARY COLOURS – OH SOUTH KENSINGTON»

The bright tones and stiff fabrics of the heavy wool uniforms trimmed with gold braid that Dragoons wear when they make their first appearance, provided a deliberate and visually effective contrast with the Aesthetic attire favored by Bunthorne and Grosvenor. A variety of images survive of these Dragoons, but it is only really the hand tinted posters and music sheet covers which capture the impact of these vivid primary colors when seen in the original production.⁵²

Unfortunately for the Dragoons the maidens, who once admired these uniforms, have now developed «exalted perceptions» and «etherealised» tastes.⁵³ They therefore extort the «fleshy Dragoon» Guards to exchange their bright primary colored uniforms for

a cobwebby grey velvet, with a tender bloom like cold gravy, which, made Florentine fourteenth century, trimmed with Venetian leather and Spanish altar lace, and surmounted with something Japanese – it matters not what – would at least be Early English.⁵⁴

As the surviving photographs make apparent, this unflattering change in attire, and the ridiculous postures adopted by the Dragoons when wearing their new garments, offered the ideal opportunity to mock the exaggerated attires and behavior of those whose affection of Aestheticism is «born of a morbid love of admiration».⁵⁵

«ALL THINGS JAPANESE»

The impact of Aestheticism on the operas produced by Gilbert and Sullivan continued beyond the 1881 production of *Patience*. Most notably, in 1885 when Gilbert was inspired by the continued enthusiasm for «all things Japanese» which «took hold in Europe and the United States after the opening of Japan to foreign trade in 1853» to create *The Mikado*.⁵⁶

As paintings such as Whistler's *Symphony in White, No. 2: The Little White Girl*, 1864, (Tate Gallery), and indeed contemporary fashions indicate, this love for 'Japanese' items had a dramatic influence on dress and décor in the late

⁵² See, for instance, an illustrated music sheet cover, published by Chappell & Co. in circa 1881, an image of which can be accessed online via [LINK](#) and a color poster 'Colonel in Patience', promoting the American tour of the production, circa 1882.)

⁵³ JOSEPHINE LEE, *The Japan of Pure Invention, Gilbert and Sullivan's Mikado*, London, University of Minnesota Press, 2010, p. 18.

⁵⁴ Libretto, *Patience*, Act I, p. 13.

⁵⁵ See S.146:163-2007, Richard Temple (1847-1912) as Colonel Calverley, Durward Lely (1852-1944) as Lieut. The Duke of Dunstable and Frank Thornton as Major Murgatroyd (1845-1918) in *Patience*, at the Opera Comique and Thornton as Major Murgatroyd, S.146:182-2007 and S.146:141-2007, DTP. These images are accessible online via [LINK](#) and [LINK](#)

⁵⁶ JOSEPHINE LEE, *The Japan of Pure Invention*, cit., p. xiv.

nineteenth century.⁵⁷ Many individuals built up vast collections of Japanese «blue and white» china and Japanese prints, and indeed the style of these prints even influenced the style of pictures produced by artists, notably Whistler and Edward Godwin (1833-1886) during this period.⁵⁸

THE HOUSE OF LIBERTY AND *THE MIKADO*

Gilbert had previously worked with the department store, Liberty's, when creating the 1881 production of *Patience* and the shop's involvement in the production gained added commercial significance when the opera went on tour to America. During the eighteenth months of this tour, Oscar Wilde gave a series of lectures both in New York and at a variety of venues across the continent. Audiences were soon made aware that Liberty of London were «responsible for the fabrics of the aesthetes» and Adburgham asserts that Wilde's lectures, and particularly that on 'House Decoration', established Liberty's as «the shop for aesthetic furnishings, for peacock's feathers, and blue-and-white china, Japanese fans and screens, for Japanese "leather" wallpapers to make modish dados».⁵⁹

For his 1885 production of *The Mikado* Gilbert commissioned The House of Liberty to provide the kimonos worn by the chief performers. This was a shrewd decision as the department store, now firmly recognized as what Wilde described as «the chosen resort of the artistic shopper», had opened up a costume department under the leadership of the noted artist, architect and commentator on Aesthetic dress Edward William Godwin in 1884. Indeed the shop's owner, Arthur Liberty's (1843-1917) commitment to the commission was such, that he is reported to have sent «special envoys to Japan to study the clothes worn there, and bring back exactly the right materials to costume the cast and dress the stage sets».⁶⁰ The degree to which this careful pursuit of accurate materials proved successful can be judged from surviving images of the costumes, such as those of Sibyl Grey (active 1880s), Leonora Braham and Jessie Bond in *The Mikado* of 1885.⁶¹

HIGH AESTHETIC TASTE

To return to *Patience* and Gilbert and Sullivan's first experiments with Aestheticism, it is clear that many factors contributed to engineer the success of the production, which ran for over 578 performances. The visual impact of dress and set, and the sharp wit of Gilbert's libretto, synergized perfectly with

⁵⁷ The actress Ellen Terry (1847-1928) was amongst those who adopted the kimono, though few women were confident enough to be photographed wearing such garments. See S.133:418-2007, Photograph of Terry, circa 1875-1880. This image can be accessed online via [LINK](#)

⁵⁸ See JAMES MCNEILL WHISTLER, *La Princesse du Pays de la Porcelaine*, 1863-1864, Freer Gallery of Art and two ceramic vases designed by Godwin, C.1-2008, V&A.

⁵⁹ ALISON ADBURGHAM, *Liberty's*, cit., p. 32.

⁶⁰ ALISON ADBURGHAM, *Liberty's*, cit., p. 31.

⁶¹ See photographs of the 'three little maids', S.146:202-2007 and S.146:165-2007, DTP (accessible online [LINK](#) and [LINK](#)) and NPG x9389 (accessible online via the following [LINK](#))

Sullivan's score, which was redolent with an «air of languor and yearning» perfectly designed for the satirical purpose of opera.

It is perhaps not surprising, given the extent of the ridicule directed at the Aesthetic movement during this period, that the happy conclusion of the production is dependent upon the return to everyday dress and sensibilities. Indeed the only character who clings on to his feigned Aestheticism is the unhappy 'sham', Bunthorne. The tragic fate of Bunthorne, deprived of «his bride» and reduced to the companionship of a «tulip or lily» is however just one illustration of the degree to which the criticism and ridicule is directed towards those who are «an Aesthetic sham», rather than genuine followers of the movement. This careful management of the narrative may explain how the production was able to satirize the movement so effectively, and yet create an opera «which did not injure the true aesthetic tree».⁶²

As Gilbert wrote in the libretto:

If this is not exactly right, we hope you won't upbraid;
You can't get high Aesthetic taste, like trousers, ready made
True views on Mediaevalism, Time alone will bring
But, as far as we can judge, it's something like this sort of thing.⁶³

⁶² *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 25 April, 1881.

⁶³ Libretto, *Patience*, Act II, p. 32.