

The Feminist Uses of Art

“‘It Is Surprising That There Are Any Happy Wives’: The *Art Interchange*, 1878–1886” by Mary W. Blanchard, in *Journal of Women’s History* (Fall 1996), Indiana Univ. Press, Journals Division, 601 N. Morton St., Bloomington, Ind. 47404-3797.

A century ago, American women searching for ways to enlarge women’s “sphere” found an important vehicle in the Aesthetic Movement. Inspired by English thinkers John Ruskin and William Morris, the movement became a craze in the United States during the 1870s and ’80s, writes Blanchard, an Associate Fellow at the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis. Its message that the pursuit of art and beauty is the pre-eminent goal in life held out the possibility that ordinary household arts such as painting, sewing, and handicrafts might be pathways to a larger world.

One of the new magazines that spread the movement’s ideas was *Art Interchange*. Launched in 1878 by Candace Wheeler, a textile designer and founder of the New York Society of Decorative Art, the fortnightly eventually claimed an audience of 20,000, mostly middle-class women. The editors dedicated themselves to the “promotion of the polite Arts in America,” but Blanchard says that “the ideal female of the *Interchange* was a woman who besieged authority and confinement as she sought her own spiritual salvation through art.” Even in acting as a tastemaker at home, a woman could assert her aesthetic sense. The magazine attacked the clergy, misogyny, and at times marriage and motherhood. One contributor wrote in 1881



that “they who give the world a true philosophy, a grand poem, a beautiful painting or statue . . . have lived to holier purpose than they whose children are of the flesh alone.”

Interchange encouraged all manner of aesthetic pursuits, at one point offering advice to aspiring manicurists, in effect “redefining the female body as an aesthetic *objet d’art* to ornament,” says Blanchard—and showing how the movement used art to escape domesticity. Helping women to find commercial outlets for their “fancy work” was also a part of the magazine’s mission.

The art that *Interchange* published in its own pages—much of it patterns for home art, embroidery, or china painting—likewise challenged the image of the chaste and submissive Victorian woman. The women often appeared alone and in frontal portraits—devices usually reserved for men. Many were undressed, and many images evoked female sensuality. In one painting, a reclining female nude is served wine by a male satyr; in another (see illustration), Juno symbolically asserts her authority over a collared peacock.

Art Interchange generally steered clear of overt politics, Blanchard says, but in its emphasis on female self-fulfillment, it prefigured much of modern feminist politics.

A Blinkered Passage to India

“Midnight’s Grandchildren” by Pankaj Mishra, in *Prospect* (Apr. 1997), 4 Bedford Sq., London WC1B 3RA.

Salman Rushdie’s brashly ambitious *Midnight’s Children* (1981) put the Anglo-Indian novel on the map. His virtuoso venture in magical realism, about the narrator’s growing up in Bombay—and India’s “growing up” after independence in 1947—won Britain’s prestigious Booker Prize and inspired a rash of imitators, who came and went. More recently, dis-

tinctive novelists such as Vikram Seth, Vikram Chandra, and Robinton Mistry have achieved critical or commercial success. Today, says Mishra, a writer based in New Delhi, Anglo-Indian fiction appears on the verge of becoming a literary phenomenon rivaling the Latin American fiction boom of the 1980s.

But Western audiences are getting a narrow