

INTRODUCTION

A gold watch; a four-hundred-year-old lock of hair; some Victorian nursery wallpaper; a notebook documenting a lost language; a mug of cocoa... Standing on the shoulders of its predecessors, this ninth edition of *Vides* brings together a thrillingly varied range of artefacts and approaches. It would be impossible to impose any conceptual unity on such a diverse array of texts. However, some overarching themes do exist, and we have used these as a guide in weaving the collection together.

One such theme is colonialism. To study British history is, often inevitably, to study the history of the British Empire, and several pieces in this volume address different facets of British imperialism. In the first essay in the collection, Nesma Shubber explores how the giving—and refusing—of gifts can constitute “a strategic manoeuvre representing the cultural dynamics of geopolitical domination”. Drawing on Marcel Mauss and Jacques Derrida, Shubber provocatively juxtaposes two instances of colonial gift-giving, comparing an image of an Indian Maharajah presenting a photograph album to Queen Victoria, with a gold watch given by a British General to an Iraqi tribal leader in 1922. Colonial dynamics are further explored by Sarah Gray Isenberg, who details how Hans Sloane—botanist, plantation owner, and later, founder of the British Museum—studied cacao through the lens of Baconian empiricism in Jamaica, and later published *Natural History of Jamaica* (1707, 1725). Isenberg notes that it was through his contact with

Indigenous and enslaved peoples during his stay in Jamaica that Sloane was able to conduct his scientific investigation, observing that “Jamaica’s colonial infrastructure facilitated Sloane’s ‘bioprospecting’ and yielded his later scientific and commercial successes”.

This is followed by James Bonney’s study of acts of listening and silencing in early colonial New South Wales. Bonney uses a very contemporary analytical lens to examine how two documentary artefacts—the first, a notebook used by a British official to record Indigenous language, and the second, a poem—respond to the settler colonial context in divergent ways. The first is testament to “an active, working and unresolved engagement with Indigenous voices”, while the second, Bonney contends, “is best understood as a form of expedient epistemic violence which operates in tandem with acts of literal violence inflicted on Indigenous peoples by British colonists”. Chala Dodds’ study of representations of Victoria Falls similarly examines colonial renderings of landscape. Dodds examines the visual language of colonialism, drawing on the writing of Stanley Livingstone and the work of artist Thomas Baines, both of whom sent informative and evocative representations of Victoria Falls to an intended audience of British citizens back home. Their efforts contributed to a migration to South Africa by Britons who were encouraged by what they read and saw in Livingstone’s report and Baines’ landscape art.

Other authors in this collection explore colonialism through the cultural influence of Britain on the world, and of the world on Britain. John Gray considers how an interdisciplinary sensibility can be useful in unpacking certain characteristics of ‘informal empire’, in this case the influence of British culture in late-nineteenth century Mexico. He documents the influence and success of the British clown Ricardo Bell and the Circo Orrin, of which Bell was the star performer. Gray examines how two artefacts linked to the clown and the circus are emblematic of the way British cultural norms were implanted in the heart of Mexican society. Jonathan Parker is also interested in how cultural influence was facilitated by British global expansion, although his essay inverts the telescope in order to trace how Japanese aesthetics impacted on Victorian visual culture. Parker contrasts Whistler’s *Nocturne in Blue and Silver* (1872–5) with a newspaper review of a ‘Japanese Native Village’, to examine how Orientalist influences were deployed in wildly differing ways. Focusing on a somewhat earlier period, Timothy Hanson also considers the influence of Japanese on British culture, juxtaposing Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s painting *The Blue Bower* (1865) and a Japanese writing box fashioned into the shape of a koto. Hanson considers both objects in the context of nineteenth-century geopolitics, and specifically Japan’s reopening to the West in 1854. Hanson argues that the koto in Rossetti’s painting is a proxy for the female genitalia. An intensely gendered object, the koto assumes multiple roles in the visual language of Rossetti, and *Blue*

Bower stands as an emblem of transgressive social mores and nineteenth-century Orientalist tastes.

Several other essays in this collection foreground questions related to gender and sublimated physicality. Amy Norton studies two items from the seventeenth century—John Donne’s poem ‘The Relique’ and a relic of hair lace—to explore how, in spite of the censure of the church, hair was integral to expressions of love and remembrance in the seventeenth century. Norton argues that “hair is a way in which to reassert the importance of touch and the body” in an era in which the body was seen as radically distinct from the spirit. Jumping forward in time, but maintaining a focus on the human body and remembrance, Natasha Shirman examines a particular aspect of Victorian society, namely the cult of mourning. Customs and rituals of grief were infused with gender differentiation in Victorian popular culture; the widow became a “decidedly visual symbol, a ‘vessel of grief,’ with her ‘body serving as a very public signifier and embodiment of her loss’.” Shirman analyses two Victorian artefacts connected to death—a bale label manufactured by a mourning house in 1860 and the paligenetic lover in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *Beata Beatrix* (1864–1870)—to highlight how the female form was used to “popularize and sell the visual cult of death”.

Moving on from ‘gender’ and the human body, several essays in this collection could broadly be said to take questions

of 'class' as their central concern. In her examination of the life and work of Joseph Skipsey (1832–1903), Joy Brindle traces how a marked duality permeated the sense of self of a man who was both a working miner and a poet, or 'a miner who writes'. Brindle investigates the "inherent tension between his 'miner-ness' and his 'poet-ness'", which becomes evident when examining two photographic portraits. Catherine Usher, meanwhile, compares two depictions of the rural labourer, discerning a perhaps comparable duality between John Linnell's oil painting *The Cornfield Cradle* (1859) and textual descriptions by Richard Jefferies. Usher argues that, while Jefferies' apparent altruism fuelled his desire to improve the 'lot of the labourer' and represent the labourers' toil, the validity of Linnell's visual narrative is compromised by personal 'religious and commercial' motives: "Linnell saw the labourers as if in Arcadia, and Jefferies as if in Hell". Nicola Catterall similarly examines how class intersects with landscape, as well as conducting a formal investigation into the function of landscape and portraiture in visual arts. Catterall details the similarities that exist between Thomas Gainsborough's painting *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* (c. 1750), and Cornelia Parker's sculpture *Landscape with Gun and Tree* (2010), which was inspired by the Gainsborough portrait. Catterall's study challenges what she terms the "straightjacket" definition of portraiture to argue that landscape in art may be understood in terms of the same criteria that are applied in the analysis of portrait painting.

Jane de Beneducci approaches Victorian class anxiety by setting nineteenth-century pseudo-science (in the form of Lorenzo Niles Fowler's phrenological bust) against William Frith's painting *Ramsgate Sands (Life at the Seaside)* (1854). At a time when the exploding urban population was eroding the social boundaries of previous centuries, "[T]he urban crowd was a mirror of Victorian modernity that was both terrifying and exhilarating." Phrenological studies offered a reassuringly clear demarcation between peoples, allowing an individual, as Fowler argued, to truly 'know [one]self'. De Beneducci shows how these two artefacts served in different ways both to express and to assuage the Victorian bourgeoisie's anxiety about social and racial difference. Staying with Victorian conceptions of the self, Eleri Ryley compares two artefacts from the era—an article written in 1853 by Charles Dickens and a swatch of *Robinson Crusoe*-inspired wallpaper designed to be hung in a nursery. In his article 'Frauds on the Fairies,' Dickens argues that classic children's stories should be kept "pure" rather than be adapted for moral purposes. The *Crusoe* wallpaper was considered by Victorian parents to be a suitable subject for a nursery, instilling particular values in the children who viewed the images as they fell asleep each night.

The collection concludes with three extended mediations on the nature and power of images. Celia Jarvis considers how, in the Victorian era, representations served to mould people's

behaviour and experience. Jarvis focuses on a poem and a painting, created fifty years apart, to examine the desire of the poet and artist, both men of deep religious conviction, to inspire a nation to worship in their daily lives. John Keble's 'Easter Eve from the Christian Year, Thoughts in Verse' (1825) and William Holman Hunt's painting, *The Shadow of Death* (1873) illustrate the impetus to uphold the idea that Christ was still relevant in the everyday lives of people in the nineteenth century. Following this, in order to evaluate Percy Shelley's literary representation of the Uffizi *Medusa*, Andrew Turner undertakes an examination of the nature of ekphrasis. Turner explores the reciprocal relationship between written and visual works: since Shelley's ekphrastic poem on Medusa serves as a "representation of representation" or a "literary reflection of visual art", the Uffizi painting can no longer be read independently from its literary successor. In this way, the "Uffizi painting has become a fragment unless it is married to Shelley's forever-fragmentary text". Lastly, inverting the approach of several previous iterations of *Vides*, this collection concludes with the essay that covers the earliest time period, Oliver Markeson's revealing investigation of the power of images in the early Tudor period. Markeson argues that Henry VIII was in fact a defender of Catholicism during the early years of the Reformation, before England's break with Rome in 1533. The artefacts he considers "reveal defence of the faith to be an instrument of political persuasion, as well as an expression of religious ideology."

There is no need to highlight the unusual and often challenging circumstances that surrounded the production of this volume of *Vides*. The final product is a testament to the vision, commitment and readiness to collaborate of this year's cohort, as well as the support and guidance we have received in doing so.