

Hidden Life: Reanimating Victorian Tableaux Vivants in the Rutland Gate Album

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Cet article examine une performance caritative de tableaux vivants présentée dans la demeure londonienne de Lady Winefred Howard en 1869. Cette première analyse de l'événement permet de repenser la portée et la signification des performances publiques de tableaux vivants dans la culture victorienne. L'intérêt scientifique récent pour la photographie mise en scène et la fabrication d'albums pendant la période victorienne a eu tendance à incorporer le tableau vivant au sein de l'histoire de la photographie. Cet article montre qu'il est tout aussi important de comprendre que la tradition parallèle de performances publiques offrait une plateforme de choix pour l'expérimentation sociale et vestimentaire, une porte d'entrée pour les figurant-es provenant des plus hautes sphères sociales vers les mondes artistiques bohémiens du mouvement esthétique victorien, et un site clé pour les catégories changeantes d'appartenance de classe.

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The tableau vivant, as a motif, permeates nineteenth-century art, literature, stagecraft, and photography and yet, as a performance practice, its significance has largely been relegated to the category of the Victorian leisure pursuit or pastime.¹ This essay attempts to recover the vibrancy of amateur performance tradition through a case study of one event in 1869, offering an analysis of a range of textual and visual sources.

On March 2, 1869, a lavish performance of tableaux vivants was held in the ballroom of 19, Rutland Gate, the London residence of Lord Edward and Lady Winefred Howard, to an audience of around three hundred guests.² It was one of the first large-scale amateur tableaux events in Britain to be planned purely on the justification of performing for an audience in the aid of a charitable cause—for the distressed Irish—and was the first of two performances, the second taking place two nights later to a similarly packed audience. The tableaux were hosted by Lady Howard but were under the artistic and stage management of the Honourable Lewis Wingfield, youngest son of Viscount Powerscourt. Elaborate set painting, costumes, lighting, and props were commissioned from the professional stage costumiers Simmons and Sons, including a huge gilt frame with crimson velvet curtains which served as a proscenium for the performers and framed the tableaux as paintings. The renowned aristocratic amateur orchestra the Wandering Minstrels, led by Seymour Egerton, future Earl of Wilton, played music in between the tableaux, alongside members of the professional theatrical world such as Arthur Sullivan and FredERIC Clay, both friends of Egerton. The performance began shortly after ten in the evening, on the arrival of the guests of honour, the Duchess of Cambridge and Princess Mary of Teck, and lasted around two hours, showing eight different tableaux subjects, each of which contained three or four scenes, developing a sense of narrative progression. The performers were largely aristocrats, predominantly women, including Lady Diana Beauclerk, Lady Sebright, Viscountess Pollington, and Marchioness Townshend, but also Val Prinsep, the well-known Pre-Raphaelite painter and member of the bohemian Holland Park circle. In addition to an array of royal and aristocratic guests, the attendance included notable figures such as Mrs. Gladstone, wife of the prime minister, as well as foreign dignitaries such as Prince Hassan Pasha of Egypt, and the Brazilian, Danish, and Swedish ambassadors. Also present were a significant number of non-aristocratic guests, members of the merchant classes such as Arthur Lewis, the wealthy silk merchant married to the renowned actress Kate

1. Richard Foulkes, *Lewis Carroll and the Victorian Stage: Theatricals in a Quiet Life* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 69.

2. "Tableaux at Rutland Gate," *Era*, March 7, 1869, 10.

Terry.³ The event was widely advertised beforehand in the press, with information about how to purchase tickets, and members of the press were present at the performance, subsequently providing a number of reviews in the national press.⁴ Rutland Gate was a prominent social event, imagined from the outset as something grander than what has come down to us as the standard image of tableaux vivants as a simple Victorian parlour amusement.

About a month after the event, notices appeared in the press announcing that a series of photographs of the performers in their costumes along with original scenery from the performance had been produced as a commemorative album, at the studios of Bernieri and Caldesi.⁵ The album was available for general purchase at a further cost of a guinea, though it was limited to six of the original eight tableaux, showing two scenes from each. The discovery that an album of photographs that documented the tableaux had been commissioned offered a tantalizing chance to get closer to the nature of the performance. My research uncovered a rare copy of this album in a private book sale, which was subsequently purchased for the University of Sussex's special collections. The album comprises twelve small albumen prints of tableaux mounted on white card in a yellow glazed card portfolio, printed on the front and back, with a morocco leather spine, and contains an original program from the event.

Despite the apparent primacy of this photographic evidence, however, the photographs exist in an awkward relation to the performance. Taken at a later date in the seclusion of a photographer's studio, they do not capture the durational dynamic between performer and spectator, having instead been created purely for the camera, as frozen imprints of the re-stagings of the original performance. In place of the lively description of the evening offered by press accounts, the photographs omit everything outside the frame of the tableau, reducing the tableau vivant to one frozen moment rather than a prolonged durational experience. Furthermore, the photographic tableau is unable to give an enlarged sense of how a wider range of performances connected with one another, forming a sinuous network of interrelated activity, sharing hosts, organizers, and performers over a number of years. Through an analysis of contemporary reports of the tableaux in the press, along with original promotional material from the event, this essay looks beyond the frozen moment offered in the tableau photograph to reanimate the world of the Victorian tableau vivant. In reanimating this event as a durational social moment, the essay views the performative element of tableaux as a platform for social and sartorial experiment and an opportunity for elite performers to enter the bohemian artworlds of the early Aesthetic Victorian period.

This is not to dismiss tableau photography. The recent rehabilitation of Victorian staged photography and the recognition of its importance within Victorian display cultures by scholars such as Marta Weiss and Patrizia Di Bello are welcome developments within tableaux scholarship, but the importance of staged photography within complex patterns of display culture should not eclipse the parallel tradition of performance.⁶ There is a danger that in attending only to the afterlife of such performances, a vibrant culture of social and performance interactions which were both a symptom of (and trigger for) shifting aesthetic, class, and social formulations may be missed. This essay is interested in the

3. The composite picture of this event comes from several contemporary press reports. See "Tableaux at Rutland Gate," *Era*, March 7, 1869, 10; "Tableaux Vivants at Rutland-Gate," *Morning Post*, March 3, 1869, 5; "Tableaux Vivants at Rutland-Gate," *Morning Post*, March 5, 1869, 5; and "Tableaux Vivants," *Standard*, March 3, 1869, 3.

4. "Town and Country Talk," *Lloyd's Illustrated Newspaper*, February 7, 1869, n.p.; "Foreign Courts," *Morning Post*, February 22, 1869, 5.

5. See, for example, "Bits of Chat," *Illustrated Photographer*, April 9, 1869, 176.

6. Marta Weiss, "Staged Photography and the Victorian Album," *Acting the Part: Photography as Theatre*, ed. Lori Pauli (London and New York: Merrell, 2006), 79–99; Patrizia Di Bello, *Women's Albums and Photography in Victorian England: Ladies, Mothers and Flirts* (London: Ashgate, 2007).

potential of these performances and concentrates on performance as the primary “tableau vivant,” while viewing the subsequently staged photographs of such events as a separate “post-living” object of analysis.

The Rutland Gate Performance

The Rutland Gate tableaux were not Lewis Wingfield’s first experience of tableau design and organization. In 1863 he designed, jointly with the photographer Victor Albert Prout, a series of tableaux vivants performed at Mar Lodge, the Scottish estate of the Earl and Countess of Fife, as part of the annual Braemar Highland games competition.⁷ The tableaux performances were one of a number of festivities arranged for the aristocratic and royal guests at the games including theatricals, a ball, and deer hunting, and were designed to mark the recent marriage of the guests of honour, the Prince and Princess of Wales. As with the Rutland Gate performance, the tableaux were then photographed, appearing the following year in a commemorative album.

Though tableaux vivants had enjoyed a period of popularity among aristocratic elites earlier in the century, the 1863 Mar Lodge tableaux marked a renewed interest in their performance in high society, and were regarded as a novel feature of society entertainment.⁸ But they were only one of a series of planned social activities during the Braemar games, not the sole focus of attention. By the 1869 Rutland Gate performance, tableaux had become the main event. They were no longer an expedient way of filling the time during the extended sojourns of the aristocracy, but were becoming the sole purpose for such gatherings to take place.

Lewis Wingfield assumed sole management at Rutland Gate (although the inclusion of Prinsep suggests a wider artistic input). | **fig. 1** | Unlike his collaboration with Prout at Mar Lodge, it does not appear that the photography was an intrinsic part of the event, being instead farmed out at a later date to a professional studio. Other connections between Mar Lodge and Rutland Gate are also discernible. Some of the performers from the 1863 Mar Lodge event performed again at Rutland Gate as well as at other, earlier tableaux events such as the Countess of Fife’s second tableaux and Lady Rokeby’s tableaux, both in 1864.⁹ Wingfield attended both these tableaux, as a performer in the first and a spectator in the second. As the youngest son of Viscount Powerscourt, Wingfield was an aristocratic insider. His scattershot career as an actor, writer, journalist, artist, and theatrical set designer, as well as accounts of his behaviour, including attending the Derby as a “negro minstrel,” spending nights in paupers’ houses, and becoming an attendant in a lunatic asylum, have tended to cast him as an eccentric amateur.¹⁰ But Wingfield’s subsequent career as, variously, painter, set designer, and costume designer to Lillie Langtry and Mary Anderson on the West End stage; his association with art professionals such as James Abbot McNeill Whistler, William Godwin, and other key aesthetes; his involvement with the International Health Convention as a specialist on historic dress and his publications on English historic costume; as well as his continued participation with tableaux design and organization, suggest that the Mar Lodge and Rutland Gate tableaux were more than a dilettante aristocratic diversion for him.¹¹

7. Weiss, “Staged Photography,” 79–99.

8. The following review refers to tableaux as a “novel feature” in London entertainments: “Countess of Fife’s Tableaux,” *The Morning Post*, February 24, 1864, 5.

9. Lady Anne Duff, daughter of the Countess of Fife, performed in 1863 at Mar Lodge, in the tableau *Hope, Faith and Charity*, in 1864 at the Countess of Fife’s tableaux in *A Dream of Fair Women*, and at Rutland Gate in 1869 under her married title Marchioness of Townshend. See “Countess of Fife’s Tableaux,” *Morning Post*, 24 Feb, 5. Lady Rokeby’s tableaux featured Captain Stewart who appeared again at Rutland Gate, and Wingfield attended this event as a spectator. “Lady Rokeby’s Tableaux,” *Morning Post*, July 19, 1864, 5.

10. Joseph Knight, “Wingfield, Lewis Strange (1842–1891), Actor, Writer, and Artist,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/29738> (accessed 8 August, 2018).

11. Knight, “Wingfield, Lewis Strange.” See also Lewis Wingfield, *Notes on Civil Costume in England from the Conquest to the Regency* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1884). On further tableaux participation see “The Shakespearian Show,” *Era*, March 29, 1884, 8. On Whistler and Wingfield, see John Sutherland, *Lives of the Novelists: A History of Fiction in 294 Lives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 183. On Wingfield and Godwin, who collaborated on costume and set for 1881 production of *Queen and Cardinal*, see Katherine Newey and Jeffrey Richards, *John Ruskin and the Victorian Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), 73.

Figure 1. Bernieri & Caldesi, Val Prinsep in "Queen Margaret and the Robber," *Rutland Gate Album*, 1869, albumen print, approx. 63 × 95 mm. University of Sussex.



Figure 2. Bernieri & Caldesi, "Guinevere," *Rutland Gate Album*, 1869, albumen print, approx. 63 × 95 mm. University of Sussex.



Figure 3. Bernieri & Caldesi, "Fair Rosamund," *Rutland Gate Album*, 1869, albumen print, approx. 63 × 95 mm. University of Sussex.



Figure 4. Bernieri & Caldesi, "Watteau," *Rutland Gate Album*, 1869, albumen print, approx. 63 × 95 mm. University of Sussex.



The Tableaux Performed and Photographed

The tableaux which were performed on the evenings of March 2 and 4, 1869, were a mixture of recognizable themes in the Victorian world of art and literature and were also broadly representative of popular tableaux vivants in the later Victorian period. There was a marked interest in medievalism, mirroring the antiquarian leanings of Victorian genre and history painting. Of the eight tableaux presented, three were chosen from medieval myth and history: *Queen Margaret and the Robber*, *Guinevere*, and *Fair Rosamund*. | figs. 1–3 | The remainder were a mixture from fairy tale and painting: *Watteau* | fig. 4 | recreated a Watteauesque swing painting; *Rescue!* reproduced Millais's painting *The Rescue* (exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1855), depicting a fashionable mother and her children being rescued from a house fire by a brave fireman; *The Babes in the Wood* | fig. 5 | recreated scenes from the popular Victorian fairy tale of two abandoned orphans; *The Spirit of the Waters* showed a scene from German myth and poetry of the siren Undine or the Lorelei; and *The Sleeping Beauty* displayed scenes from the classic fairy tale. | fig. 6 | Of the eight, *Rescue!* and *The Spirit of the Waters* were not chosen for representation in the album.

The diverse range of themes was uncommon at this time in the production of tableaux. Tableaux produced privately in the houses of the aristocracy earlier in the century had tended to concentrate on the works of a single artist or author. The *Belfast News-Letter's* coverage of the event at Rutland Gate noted that a "feature of new interest in the entertainment was that the subjects chosen for illustration were not, as almost invariably happens in such exhibitions, either Shakespearian or Miltonic, but of a miscellaneous character, comprising historic romances, fairy tales, idyllic themes from the Laureate's poems, and a few fancy groups."¹²

The eclecticism of such tableaux performances contributes to a reading of these events as either highly individualistic choices on the part of the performers or as a symptom of the Victorian clutter of ideas and styles in a series of art-based parlour guessing games. But despite the apparent heterogeneity of the subjects chosen, there are several ways of drawing these choices together into connected fields. Three of the subjects were adapted from the poetry of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, who had been appointed Poet Laureate in 1850. "Tennyson's poem was pretty closely followed" in the scenes from the conviction and repentance of Guinevere, according to the *Era's* coverage, and showed four scenes from the Guinevere section of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*.¹³ Tennyson was also identified as the source for *Fair Rosamund* by *London Society*, which quoted Tennyson's *A Dream of Fair Women*, remarking that "'the dragon eyes of angered Eleanor' were scarcely sufficiently malevolent" in Rosamund's death scene at Rutland Gate.¹⁴ The three scenes depicting *The Sleeping Beauty* were redolent of Tennyson's treatment of the story in the poem *The Day Dream*. The *Sleeping Beauty* is shown with a pearl headdress echoing Tennyson's description of her hair "forthstreaming from a braid of perl," while from her wide three quarter length sleeves "Glow forth each softly-shadow'd arm/ With bracelets."¹⁵ *London Society* also noted the Tennysonian references in remarking that the presentation was so perfect that "we entirely forgive Mr. Wingfield's managerial licence in selecting her ladyship, who is a blonde, for the princess whose 'jet-black hair' and 'full black ringlets' are sung by the poet."¹⁶ The

12. "Tableaux Vivants for the 'Distressed Irish'," *Belfast News-Letter*, March 5, 1869, n. p.

13. "Tableaux Vivants at Rutland Gate," *Era*, March 7, 1869, 10.

14. "Charity's Tableaux Vivants," *London Society: An Illustrated Magazine of Light and Amusing Literature for the Hours of Relaxation*, vol. 15 (April 1869), 292.

15. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "The Day Dream," *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, ed. Christopher Hicks (1st edn, 1969; Harlow: Pearson, 2007), 172.

scenes chosen followed the structure of Tennyson's poem, showing the Sleeping Beauty first asleep on her couch, then the arrival of the prince parting the curtains of her canopy in wonder, and finally the awakened Beauty "admirably posed on the steps which lead up to the couch" according to the *Era's* reporting.¹⁷ In the album photographs, only two of these were chosen for presentation, and the poses changed significantly in the second scene. | **fig. 7** | The Beauty no longer sits on the steps, but is placed on the couch along with the prince. This was not the first time Wingfield had chosen to use Tennyson as a source for tableaux. The Mar Lodge tableaux had presented *Elaine*, a subject to which Tennyson had turned both in *Idylls of the King* and in *The Lady of Shalott*.¹⁸ Wingfield had also appeared in the Countess of Fife's 1864 tableaux in which the final tableau of the evening was *A Dream of Fair Women*.¹⁹

The use of Tennyson as a major theme in the tableaux is, in part, a reflection of Tennyson's wider influence on Victorian visual culture, but more particularly in the work of the Pre-Raphaelites, the Arts and Crafts movement, and Aestheticism. On a broader level, the tableaux at Rutland Gate can be seen to take part in this Pre-Raphaelite approach. Rosamund had been chosen as a subject by Edward Burne Jones several times during the 1860s, and Holman Hunt and Rossetti had illustrated Moxon's 1857 edition of Tennyson's poems. The prevailing verdict on Rutland Gate was that the tableaux presented were "high art pictures."²⁰ The *Era* judged the overall appearance of the tableaux as Pre-Raphaelite, applauding the "tasty views" for "lovers of art" and concluding that the *Babes in the Wood* tableau was "in essence a perfect Pre-Raphaelite picture" in its presentation of the little children lying on a bed of ferns and lilies.²¹ This distinctive Pre-Raphaelite emblem, the lily, is absent from the studio photographs. | **fig. 6** | The *Morning Post* was more circumspect in attributing the status of art to the tableaux but conceded that they possessed "pictorial effects of light, shade, and colour, as almost to reach the dignity of works of art."²²

The aesthetic concerns of the tableaux are also apparent in Wingfield's choice both of the Watteau scene and of the recreation of Millais's painting *The Rescue*. While the revival of interest in Watteau is well documented in relation with the later Aesthetic movement, this tableau offers an early example of the renewed interest in Watteau in visual culture.²³ The *Morning Post* particularly praised this scene for its "charming expression of Arcadian enjoyment" in which "nothing angular in feeling or form" interfered with "the curving line of beauty."²⁴ Wingfield's interpretation of Millais's Pre-Raphaelite painting *The Rescue* was the most extraordinary of the evening. Unlike the other tableaux, it represented a contemporary scene of a London house fire. It included real smoke and, along with the electric lighting effects that were a part of the production, was designed to produce as authentic an experience of fire as possible.²⁵ The reviews disliked the tableau, considering it melodrama rather than art, but it is worth remembering that Millais himself went to great pains in the production of this painting to observe fire from life and reproduce it faithfully, even attending the scene of several London fires to observe effects of light and flame.²⁶ Wingfield's attempts to produce this in the tableau might be considered the extension of Millais's explorations into tableau form. Moreover the choice of a modern tableau subject echoes the shift in Pre-Raphaelitism

16. "Charity's Tableaux Vivants," 292.

17. "Tableaux Vivants at Rutland Gate," March 7, 10.

18. Marta Rachel Weiss, "Dressed Up and Pasted Down: Staged Photography in the Victorian Album," Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2008, 54.

19. "Lady Rokeby's Tableaux," 19 July, 5.

20. "Tableaux Vivants at Rutland Gate," March 7, 10.

21. "Tableaux Vivants at Rutland Gate," March 7, 10.

22. "Tableaux Vivants at Rutland Gate," *Morning Post*, March 3, 1869, 5.

23. On Watteau in fashion see Aileen Ribeiro, "Fashion and Whistler," *Whistler, Women and Fashion*, ed. Margaret F. MacDonald et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 18–51. On the affinities between Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* and tableaux vivants see Lynda Nead, *The Haunted Gallery: Painting, Photography, Film c. 1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 54–58.

24. "Tableaux Vivants at Rutland Gate," March 3, 5.

25. "Tableaux Vivants at Rutland Gate," March 7, 10.

26. For bad review see "Tableaux Vivants at Rutland Gate," March 7, 10. For Millais on fire see Robyn Cooper, "Millais's *The Rescue*: A Painting of a 'Dreadful Interruption of Domestic Peace'," *Art History* 9, no. 4 (December 1986): 471–86, 475.

Figure 5. Bernieri & Caldesi, "Babes in the Wood," *Rutland Gate Album*, 1869, albumen print, approx. 63 × 95 mm. University of Sussex.



Figure 6. Bernieri & Caldesi, "The Sleeping Beauty (asleep)," *Rutland Gate Album*, 1869, albumen print, approx. 63 × 95 mm. University of Sussex.



Figure 7. Bernieri & Caldesi, "The Sleeping Beauty (awakened)," *Rutland Gate Album*, 1869, albumen print, approx. 63 x 95 mm. University of Sussex.

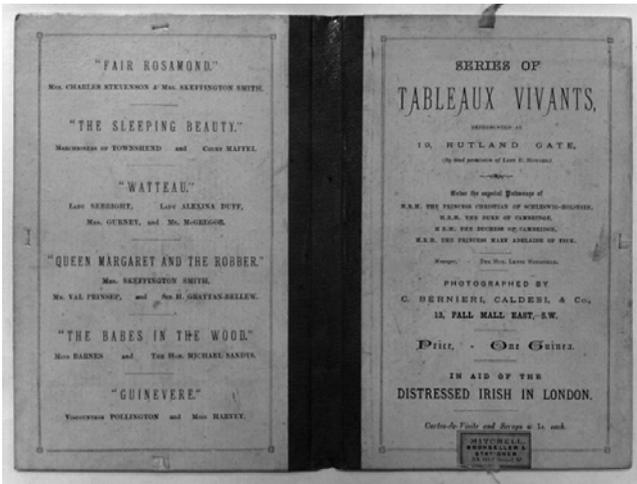


Figure 8. *Rutland Gate Album* cover, 1869, printed yellow glazed card portfolio, tan morocco spine. University of Sussex.

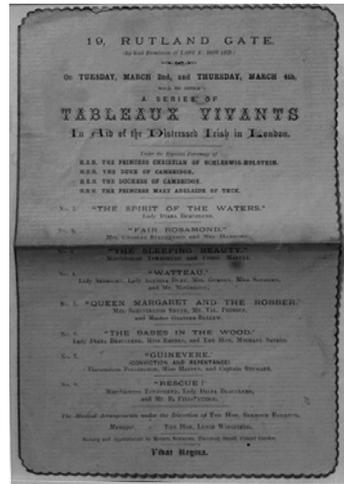


Figure 9. *Rutland Gate* printed programme of tableaux vivants, 1869. University of Sussex.

towards the contemporary in the 1850s, suggesting that the event's overall approach was driven by stylistic unity rather than simple antiquarianism.

Moreover, what is clear from this complicated tableau, which was not and could not have been photographed, was that performance was the primary concern of the tableaux: Wingfield must have known at the design stage of *Rescue!* that this could not be reproduced in a photographic studio. Furthermore, the tableaux that were chosen for representation were adapted to the constraints of the camera, often with detrimental results. In a review of the *Sleeping Beauty* tableau it is clear that a golden canopy originally stood above the bed.²⁷ In the photograph, this is missing; | figs. 6, 7 | the tighter focus necessary to make a successful photographic image did not allow for the canopy. Nor was it possible to seat the Beauty herself on the steps beneath the bed as she had on the night, again due to compositional constraints of the camera. The photographs are therefore not a reliable rendering of the performance on the night. In addition, the album was a greatly reduced set of images compared with the performance. While the eight tableaux at the performance each comprised three or four scenes, in the album only two scenes from each appeared. It also seems that some of the photographs have mismatched or duplicated backdrops, suggesting that original props and scenery were not necessarily transported from the performance location to the studio, as can be seen from the missing lilies and canopy. Lastly, it is apparent from the discrepancies between the performance program and the album that the original performers on the night were not all the same as those appearing in the photographs. In some cases, performers are missing from the tableau or else are replaced by Wingfield's wife's family, the aristocratic Fitzpatricks of Castletown, who had performed on the night and who clearly had a strong investment in the enterprise.²⁸ Comparisons of the album with the program reveal that Mrs. Skeffington Smith replaced Mrs. Hamboro in *Fair Rosamund*. Miss Sothern was absent from the *Watteau* scene. Diana Beauclerk was missing from *Babes in the Wood* and did not reprise her role in *Spirit of the Waters or Rescue!* for the camera. | figs. 8, 9 |

In the discrepancy between performance and photograph that begins to emerge here, it becomes clear that the performances staged for the camera are of a different nature from the original tableau performances. The album appears as a truncated, partial rendering of the live event, and should be viewed as a useful index, but not an accurate representation, of the performance. Performers are gone, props are missing, composition is compromised, complicated effects and lighting absent. The photographs have a somewhat slapdash feel. In some, such as *Fair Rosamund*, the rucking of the canvas backdrop is clearly visible. Two of the tableaux share a backdrop which is clearly appropriate to neither: *Fair Rosamund* (supposedly in her bower) and *The Sleeping Beauty* (in her tower) both appear in front of a complicated oriental maritime scene with boats and turbaned men. Some props, such as the chair in *The Sleeping Beauty*, seem placed in almost random positions. This suggests that the aesthetic look of the photograph was not the driving force behind the production of the image. In fact, they have a slightly thrown-together, obviously staged look: the half cropped chair, the rucked canvas of the backdrop. The staginess of the setting alerts the viewer to the image as a kind of reportage. In other words, we do

27. "Tableaux at Rutland Gate," March 7, 10.

28. Both Lady Sebright and Mrs. Skeffington Smyth were sisters-in-law to Lewis Wingfield, who had married Cecilia Emma Fitzpatrick, daughter of 1st Baron Castletown in 1868. Mr. B. Fitzpatrick, also presumably a relation, performed in *Rescue!*.

not fully invest in it as a picture of *The Sleeping Beauty*, but rather understand it as a picture of a particular woman dressed as Sleeping Beauty.

Several notices appeared in the press regarding the album, designed both to attest to its artistic nature and to promote its general sale, at a guinea a go, as a further fundraising effort for its charitable cause.²⁹ It is clear from this that it was designed not only as a keepsake for those who had attended the performance, but to reach a wider audience. A review of the album in the *Art Journal* in May 1869 noted that “though small,” the photographs “are beautifully executed: we may judge from them how gorgeously yet accurately effective the fête must have been ... The series is very charming.”³⁰ Clearly, though the *Art Journal* viewed the pictures favourably, it also saw them as secondary. The photographs were seen, not as images in their own right, but as evidence of the visual success of the primary event, as an index of another time, another place. The reviewer’s choice of words here is telling—“accurately effective”—evoking the language not of formalist criticism but of reportage.

This affects our own understanding of how these images were designed to function. The staginess of the poses and failure of the images to achieve painterly illusionism may be seen as intentional. The most illusionistic device on the evening, that of the golden frame within which the performers were placed, is not deployed in the photographs.³¹ In fact, the more they fail to depart from the real the more they achieve their purpose; achieving the pure illusionism of painting would reduce the photograph’s ability to function as a record of social reality and historical fact. In this way, the photographs become a kind of socially located portraiture, in which the participants record their presence at a key social and artistic event. And it is clear that, at the time of its performance, Rutland Gate was seen as an important event on the social and artistic calendar. In the *Era*’s “Dramatic and Musical Chronology for 1869,” which cited all the notable dramatic events of the year, including theatre riots in Cuba and the destruction of the Cologne Theatre by fire, the Rutland Gate tableaux are also listed as one of the key events in March that year.³²

Tableaux Performance and Fashioning Public Image

If such photography was aimed at further widening the public knowledge of what had already been a semi-public event it remains to be established what kinds of identity Rutland Gate’s participants imagined they were promoting. The two major benefits of the evening for those involved were that it promoted an engagement with current and, to some extent, avant-garde, sections of the art world, and that it enabled its participants to advertise themselves as active in the organization of charitable causes. Addressing the second of these benefits first, it is useful to understand the complex structures underlying the management of the Rutland Gate tableaux, which would come to be replicated frequently later in the century as charity tableaux grew in popularity and number.

Though Lewis Wingfield was responsible for the arrangement of the tableaux, the host was Lady Winefred Howard, a member of the aristocratic Howard family by marriage. Lady Winefred herself did not perform in the tableaux, restricting her involvement to the provision of her ballroom for the event to take place. Relatively little is known of Lady Howard’s public identity. She

29. See “Turning Over New Leaves,” *Fun*, April 24, 1869, 73; and “Tableaux Vivants,” *Standard*, April 8, 1869, 6.

30. “Minor Topics of the Month,” *Art Journal*, May 1869, 159.

31. “Tableaux Vivants for the ‘Distressed Irish,’” March 5, np.

32. “Dramatic and Musical Chronology for 1869,” *Era*, January 2, 1870, Issue Supplement, 1.

was the daughter of the prominent Catholic convert Ambrose Lisle March Phillips De Lisle, who was an early patron of Augustus Pugin and an ardent campaigner for the Catholic revival in England.³³ In 1862, Winefred de Lisle married Lord Howard of Glossop who belonged to one of the oldest recusant Catholic aristocratic families in England. Lord Howard had a strong interest in Catholic charities and was chairman of the Catholic Poor Schools Committee from 1869.³⁴ Lady Howard's Catholic faith and her husband's charitable interests suggest one reason why the distressed Irish may have been chosen as a charitable object. Both Wingfield and his wife's family were also Irish, albeit Anglo-Irish protestant aristocracy, and their notable investment in the event may also have been a factor in the choice. Lady Howard's popular travel journal, which comprised a three-month whistle-stop tour from Canada to Mexico, travelling by train and sometimes staying only one night in each destination, also displays her strong interest in art, particularly in the indigenous art and history of the Americas. The journal shows an impressive knowledge of the history of the Aztecs and describes intrepid journeys to see Aztec temples in remote locations, though she was by this time in her mid-fifties.³⁵ She was a member, later in the century, of the salons of the then celebrated aesthetic novelist Ouida, which were also frequented by the likes of Wilde, Millais, Rossetti, and Swinburne, and Ouida's novel *The Masserenes* is dedicated to her.³⁶

There were a series of illustrious patrons attached to the evening—Princess Christian of Schleswig-Holstein, The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, and Princess Mary Adelaide of Teck—making it a high-profile event. This containing structure provided a respectable environment for an amateur performance to take place on a more public footing without fear of impropriety. At this time, professional performance was not considered suitable for leisured women, and the fact that the audience were expected to pay for tickets was a potentially risky venture. In order to circumvent this difficulty, a complicated ticket purchasing procedure was designed to distance the performers from the monetary aspect of the event. Vouchers could be obtained via the high-status patronesses (not themselves performers) and these could then be exchanged for tickets at the cost of a guinea at the neutral location of Mitchells Library in London.³⁷ Despite these measures, sections of the press remained suspicious of the motivations of the performers, with some archly commenting that, “the project is not only charitable but disinterested, inasmuch as its promoters ... do not happen to be ‘connected’ with Ireland. Benevolence we must assume is their ruling motive.”³⁸ Others fiercely defended the event from criticism stating that “it will hardly be believed that an undertaking so irreproachable in itself, devoted to so meritorious an object, and one so to speak private, since vouchers were necessary for tickets, could not escape the sneers of the malicious and the calumnies of the censorious.”³⁹ Despite their best efforts then, this was still a contentious enterprise. Furthermore, notwithstanding the protestations in the *Sporting Gazette* it was far from clear that the event was “private.” *London Society* makes the polar opposite claim:

as the exhibition was a public one, to which any one of sufficient position to obtain a voucher and of sufficient wealth to pay a guinea, could obtain admission, it will be necessary to treat of it in that way, and to use names, which one would certainly not do were they not set down in what may be called the playbill.⁴⁰

33. Margaret Pawley, “Lisle, Ambrose Lisle March Phillipps de (1809–1878)”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/7457> (retrieved May 27, 2019).

34. Charles Kent, revised by H.C.G. Matthew, “Howard, Edward George Fitzalan- [formerly Lord Edward Howard], first Baron Howard of Glossop (1818–1883)”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/13895> (retrieved May 27, 2019).

35. Winefred de Lisle, Lady Howard, *Journal of a Tour in the United States, Canada and Mexico* (London: Marston, 1897).

36. Elizabeth Lee, *Ouida, A Memoir* (New York: Duffield and Co., 1914), 133. Also see Tom Steel, *The Langham, Opened 1865 – Re-opened 1991: A History* (London: Tom Steel, 1990), 22–24.

37. “The Distressed Irish in London,” *Morning Post*, February 22, 1869, 5.

38. “Court and Fashion,” *Bel-fast News-Letter*, March 1, 1869, n.p. Contrary to this suggestion that the enterprise was not connected with Irish concerns, Wingfield was an Irishman, as were the Fitzpatrick family into which he had recently married, suggesting that the Wingfield/Fitzpatrick family group were the organizing force around which the tableaux gathered.

39. “The Man About Town,” *Sporting Gazette*, March 6, 1869, 161.

40. “Charity’s Tableaux Vivants,” 291.

The confusion over whether this should be viewed as a public or private event hints at the changing shape of women's participation in quasi-public roles from the mid-century in Britain, especially in their use of charitable activity as a platform for advertising their place in the sphere of public life. Leisured women were not alone in utilizing charity performance as a strategic tool. In the world of the professional stage, Catherine Hindson has shown how central the practice of charity performances, galas, and fêtes was to enhancing the public image of the professional actress.⁴¹ Not only did this help to raise their profiles but, crucially, through activities co-organized with aristocratic women, actresses gained access to a new world of respectability and prestige. Later in the century, the world of the aristocrat and the actor collided more fully at charity tableaux, even to the extent that artists' models and professional actresses appeared side by side on the stage with aristocratic women.⁴² But even as early as Rutland Gate, the seeds of this cross-class fertilization were already apparent.

The obvious benefits of cross-communication for the acting profession have perhaps obscured the counter benefits experienced by aristocratic participants. An assumption that most women who engaged in tableaux were involved in self-commodification as a preamble to entering the marriage market is largely disproved by the range of performers at Rutland Gate, many of whom were already married and some of whom had reached middle age. A more likely incentive seems to have been performance itself, the chance for encounters with art worlds and the enhanced publicity which accompanied performance through charitable activity. Though the staid façade of the frozen images in the photographs emits nothing but a faint air of Victorian propriety, in reality these were vibrant affairs with many dress rehearsals and opportunities for interactions.⁴³ Reviews of the backstage happenings and dress rehearsals paint a picture of "a perfect confusion of exotics, gorgeous ornaments, gilded saloons, stage carpenters, sawing and hammering" in which "a Marie-Antoinette could be seen begging her future guards to get dressed soon."⁴⁴ Another reviewer noted that, "In the early days of culture, when living pictures were shown in Lady Freake's rooms in Cromwell-road, the performers made merry, indeed, and some droll practical jokes were played."⁴⁵

The unsupervised mixing of the sexes this suggests raises another common oversight in the scholarly reception of Victorian tableaux. There is a curious elision regarding male performers. While it is true that the majority of tableaux involved the female body, men also performed in them, and their exclusion from scholarly analysis creates a false impression that the sole function of tableaux was to reinforce models of feminine passivity.⁴⁶ In fact, there is evidence that male participation was treated with some suspicion by contemporary commentators, as a mark of effeminacy or unmanliness. Lewis Wingfield's appearance at the Countess of Fife's 1864 tableaux was regarded with some derision by the *Daily Post*, which remarked that:

It cannot be a cheerful or manly sensation to form part of a tableau with ladies, and to stand simpering and posture-making before a *salon* full of other exquisites Honourable and not Honourable. But perhaps these young gentlemen are very handsome, and find that to surfeit themselves with the knowledge is the only way of getting it for once and all off their minds.⁴⁷

41. Catherine Hindson, *London's West End Actresses and the Origins of Celebrity Charity, 1880–1920* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016).

42. Mrs. Bancroft's tableaux held at the London Home of Rachael Beer featured professional actresses like Robertha Erskine and artists' models such as Dorothy Dene alongside aristocrats like Viscountess Glentworth and Lady Glover. Also among the performers was Edward Gordon Craig. See "Nursing Echoes," *The Nursing Record*, March 5, 1891, 113–15.

43. A year after the tableaux, Lady Diana Beauclerk published a novel in which the hero, a gentleman artist, leaps down from a hackney cab to approach a beautiful young working-class woman, to ask her to sit for him. A romance then develops between the pair. The story is redolent of Rossetti's first meeting with Alexa Wilding, and was perhaps told to Beauclerk by fellow tableau performer and friend to Rossetti, Val Prinsep.

44. "Tableaux Vivants at Cromwell House," *Standard*, March 25, 1873, 4.

45. "The Man about Town," *County Gentleman: A Sporting Gazette and Agricultural Journal*, May 16, 1885, 617.

46. Many readings of tableaux view the static nature of their performance through the lens of feminist film theory, as a product of a coercive and regulating male gaze. See for example Mary Chapman, "Living Pictures": Women and Tableaux Vivants in Nineteenth-century American Fiction and Culture," *Wide Angle*, 18, no. 3 (1996): 22–52.

47. "Poses Plastiques in High Life," *Daily Post*, February 26, 1864, 1.

Figure 10. Victor Albert Prout, *Lewis Wingfield, Sketching near Mar Lodge, 1863*, albumen print, 19.70 × 6.80 cm. National Galleries of Scotland.



Figure 11. Napoleon Sarony, *Oscar Wilde, 1882*, photograph, 30.5 × 18.4 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art.



The author of the review situates such men as sharing in a narcissistic obsession with appearance and beauty that was more generally attributed to women, thus feminizing the male participants.

The failure to discuss male performers obscures the way in which charges of effeminacy associated with male tableaux performance raise the question of whether this space offered counter-cultural possibilities for men and whether tableaux participated in the feminization of art that was seen more generally within the Aesthetic movement as it gained momentum.⁴⁸ *Tableaux vivants* may in this way be seen as a part of Aestheticism's wider project, which, as Talia Schaffer has observed in a discussion of the sartorial codes of the male Aesthete, was performed within and upon "areas that had historically been associated with women: the decoration of homes and bodies."⁴⁹ It is clear from the Rutland Gate photographs that male costume was attended to in as much detail as female, and that the opportunities of experiencing liberating forms of historical dress were a source of pleasure for both sexes.

The emergence of the dress reform movement was built largely on the basis of historical interest in antique dress, often as it was reproduced in painting, and Wingfield became a major exponent of such reform.⁵⁰ In his 1884 publication *Notes on Civil Costume in England from the Conquest to the Regency*, written in the wake of his participation in the International Health Exhibition at South Kensington, Wingfield devoted as much attention to male costume as female. In addition, he explicitly cited the practice of fancy dress on the social plane as a factor in shifting sartorial possibilities: "Thanks to increased knowledge and a long course of fancy balls there is nothing that can be called outré. A damsel may appear in public in an Elizabethan coif, a Mary Stuart ruff, or a Queen Anne petticoat without the smallest danger of being mobbed or evilyly entreated, or being accused of bad taste or even lunacy."⁵¹ At Rutland Gate women had the opportunity to dress in historic styles that were similar to those identified as artistic dress, aesthetic dress, and healthy dress later in the century. The lack of hoop crinolines, the loose sleeves and dropped waists, as well as undressed hair, visible in the Rutland Gate photographs offered an early opportunity for women to experience less restrictive attire. Wingfield's own style was also unconventional and prefigured the kinds of male fashion, such as breeches, advocated by such Aesthetic dress reformers as William Godwin and Oscar Wilde during the 1880s (all the male performers in the Rutland Gate photographs are wearing breeches).⁵² A photograph of Wingfield in ordinary dress can be seen in the Mar Lodge album. | **fig. 10** | It is striking in its similarity to the photograph of Wilde in Aesthetic dress some twenty years later that caused such public derision.⁵³ | **fig. 11** | Wingfield had also used fancy dress, tableaux, and acting as an opportunity for cross-dressing, appearing in 1865 in an amateur production of *The Bengal Tiger* as "Miss Yellowleaf."⁵⁴ Elements within Wingfield's biography suggesting that he was bisexual raise the possibility that his experiments with sartorial self-fashioning operated in the developing nexus between Aestheticism and Dandyism as a visual index of homosexuality which reached its apotheosis in Wilde later in the century.⁵⁵ The picture which this paints of Rutland Gate is one of social and sartorial experiment.

48. See Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Art For Art's Sake: Aestheticism in Victorian Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 26–27.

49. Talia Schaffer, "Fashioning Aestheticism by Aestheticizing Fashion: Wilde, Beerbohm, and the Male Aesthete's Sartorial Codes," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 28, no. 1 (2000), 40.

50. For a discussion of the impact on modern dress of anti-quarianism in art see Robyne Erica Calvert, "Fashioning the Artist: Artistic Dress in Victorian Britain 1848–1900," Ph.D. diss., University of Glasgow, 2012, 42–66. While Calvert is sceptical about whether the Pre-Raphaelites actually adopted Artistic Dress in everyday life, she nevertheless identifies the historicist interest in costume which was reshaped into Pre-Raphaelite dress in art.

51. Wingfield, "Introduction," *Notes on Civil Costume*, xxxiv.

52. Calvert, "Fashioning the Artist," 90–92.

53. Calvert, "Fashioning the Artist," 130. See also, Richard Ellman, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987), 170, which recounts the episode in which Harvard students attended Wilde's 1882 lecture in Boston, dressed in full Aesthetic attire, including breeches, as a form of mockery.

54. "Hon Lewis Wingfield as 'Miss Yellowleaf'," *The Library of Nineteenth-Century Photography*, <http://www.19thcenturyphotos.com/Hon-Lewis-Wingfield-as-Miss-Yellowleaf-122094.htm> (accessed August 12, 2018).

55. "Hon Lewis Wingfield."

In many ways, Rutland Gate is symptomatic of the shifts in social mobility that Britain was beginning to experience around mid-century. The inclusion of the artist Val Prinsep and his sister-in-law Mrs. Gurney, both members of the Holland Park circle which collected around the artist George Watts, offers an example of the gradual incorporation of middle-class and bohemian sections of society into aristocratic circles that is reflected in the contemporary debates concerning whether the artist was also a gentleman.⁵⁶ Other performers on the night also included Eva Sothern, the daughter of the comic actor E.W. Sothern, and Miss Barnes, the daughter of the popular genre painter E.C. Barnes. The music was provided by the amateur aristocratic orchestra of Seymour Egerton, and by his friend and associate, the composer, and son of a military bandmaster, Arthur Sullivan.

It is important to view these events not only as symptoms but also as triggers, as key sites in which such new social interactions were being fostered and developed. And such events were not only transformative for the cultural positioning of middle-class participants, they also offered a platform for reshaping aristocratic identities. Lady Olivia Sebright who performed on the evening went on to become a celebrated amateur actress and society hostess during the 1880s, whose theatrical and literary soirees also attracted the likes of Millais, Wilde, and Whistler.⁵⁷ A description of Lady Sebright in a contemporary memoir described her as a “Bohemian” who was “one of the most fascinating women in London, extremely clever and a centre of attention in society.”⁵⁸ In 1877, the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* featured Sebright in a series on London’s most accomplished amateur actresses, describing her as “a female Crichton” whose “great dramatic powers would realize the test, perhaps the only test that can be applied—namely, that they would command a salaried engagement at a regular theatre.”⁵⁹ Though in 1869 the taint of professionalism might be thought to deter lady performers, by 1877 the association with paid employment was offered as encomium rather than opprobrium. Furthermore, the article makes it clear that this activity was a growing trend, commenting that “for many years it was not supposed to be the correct thing for [ladies] to appear, except in a drawing room performance, but latterly a change has taken place, and many have appeared on the boards of regular theatres when the object of the performance was to aid some charity.”⁶⁰

By 1880, the staging of the Cromwell House tableaux, hosted by the master builder, patron of the arts, and philanthropist Sir Charles Freake and his wife Eliza Freake, marked a definite shift in mixed-class participation. Arranged by a host of artists such as Lady Elizabeth Thompson Butler, John Everett Millais, Luke Fildes, Marcus Stone, and George Leslie, it featured a mixture of aristocratic performers such as Lady Garvagh alongside society beauties such as Mrs. Wheeler and Lily Langtry as well as literary figures such as Oscar Wilde.⁶¹ Though there was still a measure of caution concerning public/private performance, with one newspaper reporting that “many of the ladies who have agreed to take part would decline to appear” if the performance was moved to a public room, such performances were becoming a commonplace.⁶² The Freakes’s earliest hosting of tableaux had occurred in 1873, again in 1874 with further events in 1880, 1881, 1883, and 1884 taking place in a specially designed theatre space at the rear of their home in Cromwell Road;

56. For a discussion of this see Juliet Hacking, *Princes of Victorian Bohemia: Photographs by David Wilkie Wynfield* (London: NPG, 2000), 13.

57. Rebecca A. Umland, “Lillie Langtry: ‘Professional Beauty’ to International Icon,” *Women in the Arts in the Belle Époque: Essays on Influential Artists*, ed. Paul Fryer (Jefferson and London: McFarland, 2012), 48–58, 52.

58. Arthur Sebright, *A Glance into the Past* (London: Eveleigh, Nash and Grayson, 1922), 33–34.

59. Lord William Lennox, “Aristocratic and Distinguished Amateurs,” *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, February 10, 1877, 483.

60. Lennox, “Aristocratic and Distinguished Amateurs,” 483.

61. “Gossip from To-day’s World,” *The Evening Telegraph*, May 5, 1880, 2.

62. “London Gossip,” *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle*, April 24, 1880, n.p.

they were among a variety of musical recital and theatrical events which were designed for philanthropic purposes and which attracted a glittering society audience including the Prince of Wales. The earlier tableaux performances in 1873, while attracting elite audiences, appear to have featured mostly professional actors, perhaps reflecting an unwillingness on the part of polite society to be seen on equal terms with men of trade. But by 1880, members of the aristocracy had been incorporated into the performances. This social mixing, even at the level of the audience, did not go without public censure. Mrs. Julian Hawthorne, an American visitor who herself attended the Freakes's 1881 tableaux, subsequently lambasted the Freakes in an article lamenting that "a quondam pot-boy entertains the nobility and gentry of England!"⁶³ Mrs Hawthorne's chief complaint was the Freakes's strategic deployment of cultural capital as a springboard to social inclusion: "in angling for personages," Hawthorne writes, "the plebeian fisher must use superior bait. Mrs Freake is never unequal to the occasion. In the first place, she reconnoitres among her literary and artistic acquaintances. Having secured their co-operation, she next enlists the support of the reigning beauties and special celebrities, male and female."⁶⁴

Despite such genteel squeamishness the practice of charity tableaux continued to flourish under the patronage of royalty and the assistance of the professional stage and art world. And despite the air of propriety it gained from these quarters there was a lingering suspicion that it was a dangerously hybrid space in which existing social hierarchies might become attenuated. Indeed, when Max Beerbohm looked back to the birth of the Aesthetic period in his parodic essay "1880," he selected as the key motifs of the movement not only "blue china," "white lilies," Rossetti, and Swinburne, but also "the tableaux at Cromwell House."⁶⁵

Beerbohm's comic vignette "1880" seeks to locate a key moment in Victorian culture at which the rarefied art worlds of Rossetti and Swinburne collided catastrophically with the world of aristocratic fashion. In the year 1880, Beerbohm tells us, "the sphere of fashion converged with the sphere of art, and revolution was the result"—Aestheticism.⁶⁶ Beerbohm places Wilde at the heart of this collision: "It was Mr. Oscar Wilde who managed her [Aestheticism's] *debut*." Beerbohm pronounces using the specifically female metaphor of the debutante to describe Aestheticism, a movement "whose keenest students of the exquisite were women."⁶⁷ Wilde's effeminate sartorialism, his elevation of women's culture to an art form, the tableaux at Cromwell House, the female "invasion" of the Grosvenor Gallery, and the pre-eminence of a new typology of femininity—the "professional beauty"—are all markers, for Beerbohm, of a temporarily feminized social and cultural sphere. Written from the position of 1894, when the public scandal of Wilde's homosexuality heralded the demise of Aestheticism more generally, the essay forms the parodic elegy of an abortive and misguided cultural moment. Beerbohm styles the demise of this period in appropriately performative terms as "the romantic moment" at the end of a pantomime when "the winged and wired fairies begin to fade away, and, as they fade, clown and pantaloons tumble on juggling and grimacing, seen very faintly in that indecisive twilight."⁶⁸

63. "London Gossip," *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle*, April 20, 1881, n.p.

64. "London Gossip," April 20.

65. Max Beerbohm, "1880," *The Prince of Minor Writers: The Selected Essays of Max Beerbohm*, ed. P. Lopate, (New York: New York Review Books, 2015), 155–163, 155.

66. Beerbohm, "1880," 158.

67. Beerbohm, "1880," 158, 161.

68. Beerbohm, "1880," 162.

Wilde's sexual transgression and women's social ones are seen as twin symptoms of this period. A more counter-cultural or subversive reading of tableaux vivants is also now seen only faintly in an indecisive twilight, having been replaced by an image of them as respectable or frivolous leisure amusement. Though Beerbohm situates the critical moment of the Aesthetic revolution in 1880 with Wilde himself and with the Aesthetic tableaux at Cromwell House, this process had been building gradually since the end of the 1860s, and was not only a result of the canonical male exponents of Aestheticism, but was also a product of new social interactions being shaped by men and women across an increasingly porous class boundary. The Rutland Gate album invites us to recall these moments. ¶