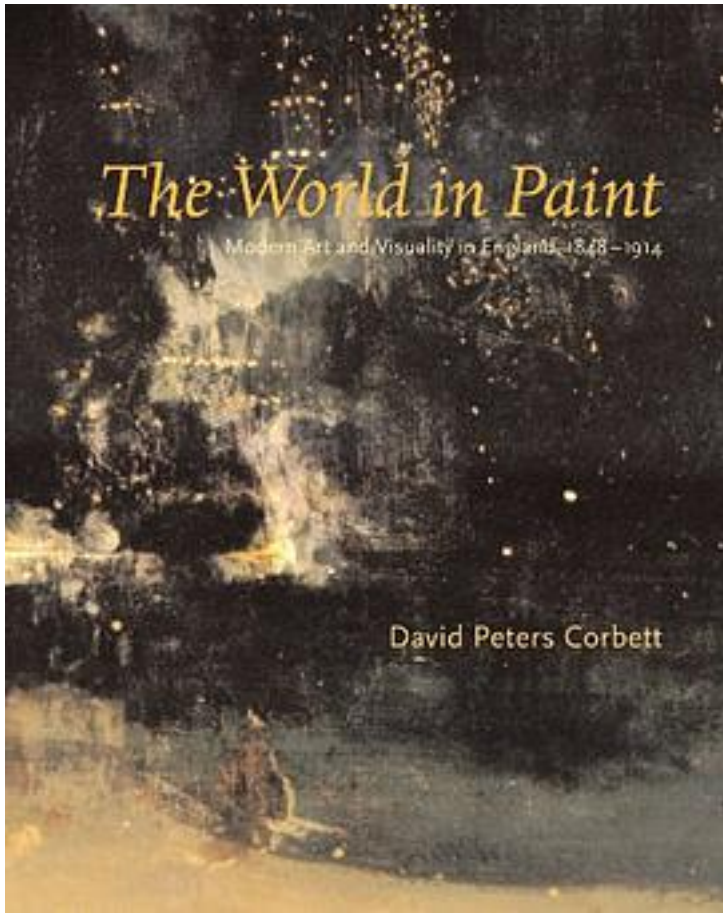


The World in Paint



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Paintings of a "kept woman" sitting in her lover's lap, of the Lady of Shalott, of Merlin the magician, of an explosive, abstract pattern--some rendered in meticulous detail, others only sketched--appear side by side in David Peters Corbett's book on English art. The sharp differences in style and in subject matter are striking and significant, but

they are not presented in any of the usual ways. They are not seen as markers of a progressive development, expressions of strong personalities, or signs of English artists' inability or reluctance to master French Impressionism. All these familiar narratives are abandoned in Corbett's book, which, in their stead, proposes a new way of looking at English painting from the Pre-Raphaelites to Wyndham Lewis and the Vorticists. An award-winning art historian, Corbett contends that from 1848 to 1914, English artists confronted a world in which the rise of science and decline in religion deprived painting of many of its traditional functions and powers. Yet these same changes, according to Corbett, presented the possibility that painting could become a crucial means of mediating the widely decried materialism of industrial society. It could expose the values that had been lost, reveal hidden spiritual and emotional resources, or, alternatively, welcome and champion the dynamics of modernism. Corbett makes persuasive use of a wide range of sources, including contemporary art criticism, artists' letters, literature, and, not surprisingly, the torrent of publicity touched off by the Whistler versus Ruskin trial of 1877. But what gives his book originality is its incisive discussion of aesthetic issues that art historians, intent on social history, have generally overlooked. Corbett puts readers in contact with debates about visual experience, the handling of paint, codes of beauty, and questions of meaning. Many of Corbett's points entail close analysis of art. The World in Paint is amply illustrated with high-quality color and black-and-white reproductions.

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