



9-21-2012

*Internationalism and the Arts in Britain and Europe at the Fin de Siècle* by Grace Brockington (ed.)  
(Review)

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Jensen, Robert, "*Internationalism and the Arts in Britain and Europe at the Fin de Siècle* by Grace Brockington (ed.) (Review)" (2012).  
*Art & Visual Studies Faculty Publications*. 3.  
[https://uknowledge.uky.edu/art\\_facpub/3](https://uknowledge.uky.edu/art_facpub/3)

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**Notes/Citation Information**

Published by *geschichte.transnational*, p. 1-3.

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## **G. Brockington (Hrsg.): Internationalism and the Arts in Britain and Europe at the Fin de Siècle**

Review by **Robert Jensen**, geschichte.transnational 21.09.2012

<http://geschichte-transnational.clio-online.net/rezensionen/id=14656&type=rezbuecher&sort=datum&order=down&search=%22Internationalism+and+the+Arts+in+Britain+and+Europe+at+the+Fin+de+Si%E8cle%22&segment=16>

Grace Brockington and the eleven other contributors to *Internationalism and the Arts in Britain and Europe at the Fin de Siècle* explore sites of cultural resistance to the rising tide of nationalism that culminated in the world disaster of the First World War. They attempt to look under the narrative rock of historical inevitability, in which nationalist rhetoric and imperialist political and economic policies marches toward global conflict, to reconstitute aspects of British and European culture and society that promoted international cooperation, cross-cultural understanding and intellectual and artistic exchanges.

The twelve essays in the volume tend primarily to explore the theme of antebellum internationalism in the context of what Grace Brockington describes as “individual self-definition” (p. 18). Therefore, while Brockington’s own essay and that of Daniel Laqua examine the institutions that helped foster international cultural interactions during this period, most of the authors articulate through the artistic and written responses of famous artists and writers the stresses developing between national identity and cosmopolitanism.

In addition, most of the essays take the vantage of British interaction with the Continent. The key figures surveyed are predominately British: the painter Walter Sickert (Anna Gruetznier Robins), the composer John Foulds (James G. Mansell), the novelists Ford Madox Ford and E. M. Forster (Petra Pau), and the playwright George Bernard Shaw (Hannes Schweiger). Other essays take up the impact of British cultural figures on the Continent - William Morris and the influence of the Arts & Crafts Movement in Russia (Rosalind P. Blakesley) and in Central Europe (Andrzej Szczerski) and the reception of Oscar Wilde in Prague (Neil Stewart) - or conversely, the reception of Henrik Ibsen in Britain (Tore Rem). The general effect of these essays is to give British involvement in cultural debates over nationalism versus internationalism centrality unusual among studies of European cultural networks in the pre-war era.

The essays also cannot help but demonstrate the extraordinary complexity of meaning that can be attached to such words as ‘cosmopolitanism’ or ‘nationalism’ or ‘internationalism’, and how the meanings attached to these terms shift according to context. The essays similarly test the limits of intellectual history to account for cultural diffusion. With so many nuances, say, in E. M. Foster’s understanding of the local versus the international that Petra Rau so carefully explores in *Howard’s End*, Forster’s attitudes toward local identity versus cosmopolitanism tend to dissolve into ambiguity and ambivalence. Or, as Blakely noted in

her essay, the success of international cooperation, and one might add international understanding, often depended upon the ability to fashion “the other in one’s own national image” (p. 244). Each essay in the volume offers a remarkably nuanced reading of the negotiation of these terms and the identity politics that inform them.

Another major take away from these essays is how internationalism was so often leveraged by repressed local identities. As Szczerski notes, “The ‘Internationalism’ of Esperanto signified not only a utopian community of people, but also an end to the persecution of smaller nations living in multinational empires [...]” (p. 130). In architecture and design, Szczerski argues, the search for an ethnically specific vernacular design language was then perceived as the equivalent of Esperanto, a means to assert local identities, while at the same time linking those identities to an international and what was presumed to be the universal language of design.

Because of who the authors write about there is an inbuilt high culture bias in almost all these essays. Something as relevant as the contemporary Olympic movement makes no appearance in the volume, despite the fact that it is an obvious exemplar of how international cooperation, competition, nationalism, non-state sponsored participation and state-sponsored participation all played out. (To make the Games even more relevant for this volume, London was the host of the 1908 Olympics, and it was at the London Olympics that issues of nationalism versus international cooperation really surfaced for first time). It is probably true that the views of literati and artists mattered more in 1900 than they do today, but it is also the case that by concentrating on high culture intellectuals and artists one misses other, potentially larger cultural forces at work. As I read these essays I kept thinking of the great diaspora of Eastern European Jews. Many landed in Britain or passed through to the Americas. Others remade the cultural landscape of Paris. Coerced migration created patterns of cultural interaction that literally rewrote the European cultural landscape in the early years of the 20th century.

I would also argue that the authors, collectively speaking, take too little interest in the means of cultural dissemination, or attempt to distinguish between ideas that traveled well, easily crossing national borders, versus those that did not. A reproduction of an Arts and Crafts textile design could be as influential as any English-language text written in support of its aims. Certain ideas or forms of expression could easily get lost in translation, slowing or preventing their transmission. Even international organizations would have had differing rates of transmission, with some more or less inclusive, with more stringent gatekeeping than others. Whistler’s International Society, for example, was a much more closed organization, consisting of only well-established and comparatively conservative artists, than, say, Paris’ *‘Société des Indépendants’*, which sponsored an annual Salon, with few barriers and a highly diverse body of exhibitors.

Finally, for all the high culture character of these essays, they take strangely ambivalent positions vis-à-vis the post-1905 transnational phenomena of avant-gardism on the Continent. It is perhaps relevant that Roger Fry’s first ‘Post-Impressionist’ exhibition in 1910

concerned only French art (with van Gogh, Picasso and Vallotton treated as Frenchmen). He did better with the second exhibition in 1912, where he admitted British and Russian artists. But Fry was quite explicit about excluding artists from other European nationalities, in particular Central Europe. Compare those exhibitions with the wide-open internationalism of the Cologne Sonderbund exhibitions or the New York Armory Show. On the continent and in New York, the “isms” with their inherent transnational cultural ambitions transcended the categorization of art according to national schools, something that ironically Fry continued to insist upon.

I found all these essays to be very illuminating. However one wonders at the unspoken cultural assumptions that bracket these essays, assumptions having to do with British culture in relationship to the European avant-gardes, high versus popular culture, and individual cultural actors versus institutional, economic, and demographic forces working both on behalf of nationalist separation and internationalist cooperation. That these assumptions are not systematically addressed in these essays does not diminish them, but it does point to needed avenues of research on cross-cultural networks during *la belle Epoque*.