

## MIT Open Access Articles

*Grand Designs: Labor, Empire, and  
the Museum in Victorian Culture*

The MIT Faculty has made this article openly available. **Please share**  
how this access benefits you. Your story matters.

**Citation:** Ferng, Jennifer. "Grand Designs: Labor, Empire, and the Museum in Victorian Culture by Lara Kriegel. Duke University Press, Durham, NC, U.S.A., 2007. 328 pp., illus. Hardcover ISBN: 978-0-8223-4051-5. Paper ISBN: 978-0-8223-4072-0." *Leonardo* 42.2 (2009): 169-170.

**As Published:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/leon.2009.42.2.169>

**Publisher:** MIT Press

**Persistent URL:** <http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/57451>

**Version:** Final published version: final published article, as it appeared in a journal, conference proceedings, or other formally published context

**Terms of Use:** Article is made available in accordance with the publisher's policy and may be subject to US copyright law. Please refer to the publisher's site for terms of use.





Project  
**MUSE**<sup>®</sup>

*Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.*

---

## **Grand Designs: Labor, Empire, and the Museum in Victorian Culture**

Jennifer Ferng

Leonardo, Volume 42, Number 2, April 2009, pp. 169-170 (Review)

Published by The MIT Press



For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/len/summary/v042/42.2.ferng.html>

through Titan's bizarre orange atmosphere to land on the giant moon.

Chapter 6, "The Mission Goes On," describes the mapping, atmospheric and geological data gathered from Titan's surface and presents the reactions of various astronomers and the amazement back on Earth.

Chapter 7, "Where We Are and Where We Are Going," sets the stage for the further analysis of the collected data, which is incredible because of its quantity and also for the astonishing picture it has painted of these distant worlds in our solar system.

The mysterious nature of Titan has become a little less so, thanks to the Cassini-Huygens mission, but the mission has also posed as many new questions as it has answered.

The tale of unveiling Titan in the last year or two (2006–2008) has been one of science in action, with some ideas tested by data and found wanting, and in other cases guesses being smugly confirmed. Still others we want to be true, but the data so far are not good enough to be sure. It is a work in progress (p. 230).

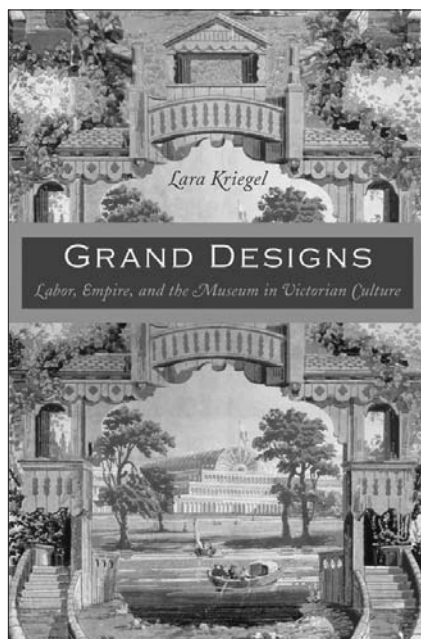
Ralph Lorenz is a planetary scientist at Johns Hopkins University, and Jacqueline Mitton is a writer, editor and media consultant in astronomy. Their combined efforts have created a book that, apart from being an excellent scientific account of this mission made accessible for the general public, is simply a good tale in itself. Anyone interested in alien landscapes that boast liquid methane seas, turbulent orange skies, methane monsoons, equatorial sand seas and a polar hood all brought together with a sense of adventure will enjoy this unique book.

### GRAND DESIGNS: LABOR, EMPIRE, AND THE MUSEUM IN VICTORIAN CULTURE

by Lara Kriegel. Duke University Press, Durham, NC, U.S.A., 2007. 328 pp., illus. Hardcover ISBN: 978-0-8223-4051-5. Paper ISBN: 978-0-8223-4072-0.

*Reviewed by Jennifer Ferng, Department of Architecture, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. E-mail: <jferng@mit.edu>.*

The spectacular display of industrial products showcased at the Great Exhibition of 1851 in the Crystal Palace is familiar to most enthusiasts of 19th-century Victorian culture. Using the Great Exhibition as a backdrop to her historical narrative about design reform in Britain, Lara Kriegel restores



the significance of labor to the field of cultural history, highlighting how quotidian tradesmen assisted in shaping the ideological missions of once humble institutions such as the modern-day Victoria & Albert Museum in London's South Kensington. While these educational and political battles raged within studio classrooms and the halls of Parliament, activist teachers of the fine arts such as Benjamin Robert Haydon and Charles Heath Wilson deliberated over the merits of drawing the human figure and Etruscan vases, jockeying for the hearts, minds and pocketbooks of their students in training. The pursuit of genius, as perceived by one of the protagonists, William Dyce of the Government School of Design, was frowned upon, not for its elevation of the individual ego in artistic creation, but for its lack of modesty (and perhaps morality) on the part of the artist in pursuing the "useless" occupation of being a painter. Torn between remaining common men with ordinary tastes and becoming savants who could be assimilated into the proper world of art, these British artisans serve as reminders of those who brought some of the most important Victorian issues of class, economics, education and gender to the attention of their middle-class peers, as well as to contemporary consumers of decorative ornament.

This study paints a lively picture of how such familiar London institutions of art and design collided with the greater forces of industry and markets and makes a pointed behind-the-scenes inquiry into some of the more minor figures who played a crucial

role in determining Britain's attitudes toward aesthetic development. Kriegel situates her critique of the Victorian museum as a revision of the "exhibitionary complex," a concept authored by cultural critic Tony Bennett, who asserts that the museum signified two important ideas—first, that it was a utopian location, devoid of geographic or local contexts, and second, that it transformed its visitors into obedient and passive consumers of visual culture, recalling Michel Foucault's notion of 19th-century liberal reforms managing unrestrained populations enjoying the fruits of democracy. Her critique encourages readers to reconsider the self-fashioning of the workingman at the center of these institutions' desire for expansion into the public sphere. She characterizes each of these episodic chapters—including the machines and commodities at the Great Exhibition of 1851, Henry Cole's initial endeavor to organize the Museum of Ornamental Art, and his outpost of the South Kensington Museum at Bethnal Green—as a highly conflicted arena, though without any of the potential nuances attached to each historical example. The tenuous role of artisans within the industrial regime of Britain is often contrasted with the more professional, stabilized occupations of painters and architects. Each chapter is meticulously researched, demonstrating her historian's eye for detail and flair for heightened dramatic tensions between the given historical actors and the public's perception of them. Close evaluations of design journals, newspapers and firsthand testimonies are provided throughout the book, while the visual representations, although equally valuable, could have been analyzed in more depth and instead are used as additional forms of evidence to support Kriegel's arguments.

The case of intellectual copyright for calico patterns from 1839–1851 exemplifies how the piracy of design became a questionable art on its own. The protection of domestic woolen and silk trades led to the growth of other fringe trades that copied outlawed Indian cotton fabrics using cylindrical rollers to print multiple pieces of cloth over the course of one day. Kriegel evokes Charles Babbage's *Economy of Machines and Manufactures* (1832), which stated that mechanical reproduction often enhanced the value of an original design; this opinion provides a balanced counterpoint to Walter Benjamin's prominent view of mechanical

reproduction as well as a fresh outlook on the classic differences between what was considered an original design and its copy.

The discourse of aesthetics—including components of color, line, pattern and style; methods of fabrication; and artisans' exterior influences—is, however, subservient to Kriegel's greater interest in making the production of labor transparent when considering the luxurious Sèvres porcelain of France or the "woven-wind" muslin of India. The market conditions of the 19th century are framed as direct influences on the design debates and anxieties that Kriegel discusses; here, the author owes her methodology to such predecessors as Maxine Berg and Leora Auslander, each an economic historian who has respectively argued for the importance of supply-side market goods produced by either commercial tradesmen in Britain or furniture makers in France. The effects of "Empire," although present as one of the words in the title of book, are lightly touched upon. The orientalism of ethnic imagery, blatantly noted in the Great Exhibition's classification of India and China's wares, is explained as a token practice of a British audience who often stereotyped indigenous peoples along with their products, even though many of these foreign goods were far superior in quality to those of Britain.

For those nostalgic for the days when imperialism reigned and the museum was not yet a domineering manifestation, Kriegel's book casts an interdisciplinary perspective onto the enlightened richness of Victorian design while sidestepping more traditional interpretations that once held these industrial products to be merely rashly conceived and poorly executed.

## THE PARASITE

by Michel Serres. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, U.S.A., 2007. 255 pp. ISBN: 0-8166-4881-6.

*Reviewed by Anthony Enns, Department of English, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. E-mail: <anthony.enns@dal.ca>.*

The University of Minnesota Press recently released a new edition of Michel Serres's 1980 book *The Parasite* as the first volume of their "posthumanities" series, which includes works by Judith Roof, Donna Haraway, Roberto Esposito and David Wills. The translation, by Lawrence Schehr, is the same

as his original translation, which was first published in 1982, and the only substantial change that has been made to the text is the addition of a new introduction by series editor Cary Wolfe, in which he discusses the decision to include *The Parasite* as the first volume in this new series. Instead of representing a substantially new version of Serres's book, in other words, this edition reframes his work within a new scholarly context, thus illustrating its indelible impact on contemporary critical theory, systems theory and post-humanist studies.

Serres's primary argument is that the relationship between a parasite and its host serves as a useful model for all forms of social, cultural and technological mediation. Instead of conceptualizing social relations according to the model of exchange, for example, Serres argues that all acts of exchange are actually based on exploitation. Serres explains this idea by replacing Marx's concept of "exchange value" with the term "abuse value," which he defines as "complete, irrevocable consumption" that only works in "one direction" (p. 80). Abuse value "precedes use- and exchange-value," according to Serres, because "exchange is always weighed, measured, calculated, taking into account a relation without exchange, an abusive relation" (p. 80). The French word "parasite" also signifies noise or static, which enables Serres to extend his argument to communication systems as well. Instead of seeing communication as a two-way process, for example, he argues that every channel also contains an element of interfer-

ence, which constantly threatens to disrupt the signal. Serres adds, however, that such disruptions are potentially productive, as they result in the formation of a "new system" (p. 52). Serres even extends this metaphor to biological systems by arguing that evolution similarly depends on "mutations" within a system (p. 184). The value of the parasite as a concept, therefore, is that it encompasses such a wide range of fields, including anthropology, biology and communications.

When Serres's book was first published, reviewers often framed his argument within the context of either information theory or poststructuralism. Serres's discussion of the positive value of noise, for example, bears obvious similarities to Claude Shannon's concept of information entropy or the notion of noise itself as information. There are also similarities between Serres's discussion of parasitical relations and Derridean concepts like hospitality and the gift, which similarly address the paradoxical nature of exchange and subjectivity. Serres's notion of the "hôte" as simultaneously both host and guest, for example, illustrates the impossibility of sustaining the concept of the host as a controlling subject on which the principle of altruism is based. Serres's notion of the "quasi-object" similarly implies that identity is a product of the relationship between subject and environment rather than an inherent quality of the subject itself, as this object "marks or designates a subject who, without it, would not be a subject" (p. 225). When an athlete holds a ball, for example, his or her subjectivity is determined by his or her relationship to the ball, yet when the ball is passed to another player this identity abruptly becomes a collectivity. Serres's notion of individual identity as fundamentally intersubjective can thus be seen as part of the broader poststructuralist critique of Western metaphysics.

In his introduction, however, Wolfe argues that Serres's text can also be seen as a pioneering work in systems theory and posthumanist studies. Wolfe argues, for example, that the notion of noise as a productive and creative force was also a key influence on theorists like Gregory Bateson and Niklas Luhmann. In his seminal essay "Cybernetic Explanation," for example, Bateson argues that noise represents "the only possible source of new patterns" (p. xiii). Wolfe argues that Serres's discussion of systems and "black boxes" also prefigures the work of second-wave systems theorists like Luhmann, Hum-

