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Recommended Citation

Lessing, Lauren K., "New Perspective: Rereading Seymour Joseph Guy's "Making a Train"" (2011). *Faculty Scholarship*. 66.
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New Perspective

Rereading Seymour Joseph Guy's *Making a Train*

Lauren Lessing

In March 1868 a reviewer for the *Commercial Advertiser* described a small painting on view in Seymour Joseph Guy's Tenth Street studio in Manhattan. It depicted a young girl preparing for bed and holding around her waist "a gaudy skirt of a dress, its folds, draped behind her, forming a train. From her shoulders a single garment hangs loosely, disclosing her neck and finely rounded shoulders."¹ The painting, originally titled *The Votary* (or *Votares*) of *Fashion*, is now known as *Making a Train* (fig. 1). Visually complex, beautifully painted, and disturbing in its sensual presentation of a prepubescent female body, *Making a Train* has long intrigued scholars of American art and culture. Recently, the painting's inclusion in the exhibition *American Stories: Paintings of Everyday Life, 1765–1915* confirmed its position in the canon of American art.² Concealed behind the scholarly narrative of this picture's Americanness, however, is the fact that Guy—who was born and trained in England and arrived in the United States at the age of thirty—used an artistic vocabulary drawn from British painting. This was noted by the reviewer for the *New York Herald*, who commented, "the details and minor points [of *The Votary of Fashion*] are worked up with almost Pre-Raphaelite fidelity."³ Guy's painting can usefully be viewed as an example of Victorian social realism—a literary and symbol-laden reflection on a contemporary social quandary. Specifically, it addresses the deleterious effects of modern consumer culture on the bodies and morals of young girls. In his 1994 book *Picturing a Nation*, David Lubin deftly explored the latent eroticism of *Making a Train* but contended that the subject's sweetness and youth prevented any overt acknowledgment of this subtext by nineteenth-century viewers.⁴ Countering Lubin, I suggest that Guy likely intended the precocious sexuality of the young girl to be not only explicit but also part of a larger moralizing message. With *Making a Train*, he created a "problem picture" that invites viewers to ponder the dangers of rampant consumption and rapid development—anxieties that preoccupied many Americans in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁵

Guy's original title is crucial to understanding his intent. One source for his imagery may have been Scottish poet Robert Pollock's popular 1827 *The Course of Time*. The poem, which went through many editions in the nineteenth century, features a parade of characters, each of whom represents a virtue or a vice. In marked contrast to "The Exemplary Wife," who is a "modest, meek, retiring dame," Pollock described "The Votares of Fashion" as vain and preening.



1 Seymour Joseph Guy, *Making a Train*, 1867. Oil on canvas, 18 1/8 x 24 1/8 in. Philadelphia Museum of Art, The George W. Elkins Collection

*She was convinced
That God had made her greatly out of taste,
And took much pains to make herself anew.
Bedaubed with paint, and hung with ornaments
Of curious selection—gaudy toy!
A show unpaid for, paying to be seen!*⁶

Perhaps in response to Pollock's harsh, satirical tone, popular English author Henry Gardiner Adams wrote a sentimental poem on the same theme in 1836 titled "Fashion's Votaress." His verse is a wistful reflection on lost childhood innocence in which a country

girl is ruined by her love of fine clothing. The poem begins, “I knew her when, as fairy light, / She ’mid the scenes of childhood stray’d, / When o’er her laughing eyes so bright, / The sunny ringlets wildly play’d; / Then all was artless joy and peace, / Within her gently heaving breast.” It continues:

*Those promised charms are now matured,
And grace in every feature dwells,
But oh! The smile which then allured,
No longer guileless pleasure tells;
Amid the heartless and the gay,
At fashion’s shrine she bows the knee,
And passions wild, that breast now sway,
Which then from all but peace was free.⁷*

George Eliot’s 1859 novel *Adam Bede* similarly presents a pretty, rural girl who is destroyed by vanity. Like the little girl in Guy’s painting, Hetty Sorrel plays dress-up in her attic bedroom, dreaming of gowns she hopes one day to wear.

At the thought of all this splendor, Hetty got up from her chair, and in doing so caught the little red-framed glass with the edge of her scarf so that it fell with a bang on the floor; but she was too eagerly occupied with her vision to care about picking it up; and after a momentary start, began to pace with a pigeon-like stateliness backward and forward along her room, in her colored stays and colored skirt, and the old black lace scarf round her shoulders, and the great glass earrings in her ears.⁸

As a direct result of her desire for finery and admiration, Hetty is seduced and driven to murder her illegitimate child. Indeed, the country lass corrupted by vanity and ambition had become a stock character of Victorian literature by the 1860s. Little Emily in Charles Dickens’s widely read 1850 novel *David Copperfield* is another example.

It would hardly have been surprising for Guy to turn to English literature as one source for his small genre scene. During his career, he created several overtly literary paintings, including *Shakespeare* and *Songs of Innocence*.⁹ Guy came of age as an artist in London in the 1840s and 1850s, when he could have seen many other painters draw on literary sources to create narrative pictures with social and moral content. Guy, who was born in Greenwich, Kent, in 1824, arrived in London about 1845 and enrolled as a student in the British Museum, where those without the means for private instruction could prepare for the Royal Academy entrance exams. By 1847 he was studying under James Parker “Ambrosini” Jérôme (sometimes called Ambrose Jerome), a genre, history, and portrait painter for whom he also worked as an assistant.¹⁰ He probably arrived in the capital too late to see Richard Redgrave’s painting *The Sempstress* (fig. 2), exhibited in 1844 at the Royal Academy, where it caused a sensation. He almost certainly knew of the painting, though, probably through one of two prints (the engraving by Robert Staines circulated widely) or perhaps having seen the picture when it was auctioned in 1852.¹¹ The entry for the painting in the 1844 Royal Academy catalogue reproduced the following excerpt from Thomas Hood’s 1843 poem “The Song of the Shirt”:

*With fingers weary and worn,
With eyelids heavy and red,
A woman sat in unwomanly rags,
Plying her needle and thread—*

Stitch! Stitch! Stitch!
In poverty, hunger, and dirt,
And still with a voice of dolorous pitch
She sang "The Song of the Shirt!"¹²

Like Hood, Redgrave sought to expose the plight of the working poor. *The Sempstress* depicts the destitute woman of Hood's poem toiling late into the night in a dimly lit garret. The many details of the scene (the clock reading 2:30, the broken washbasin, the crust of bread on a plate, the plant dying on the windowsill, and the woman's pathetic expression) tell a story of labor and deprivation that will likely end in death. Both this painting and Redgrave's equally well-received *Fashion's Slaves* of 1847, in which an indolent and gorgeously dressed society woman heaps abuse on another poor seamstress, take aim at the modern culture of fashion and the sweatshop labor that supported it.¹³

Two decades later, with *Making a Train*, Guy made similar use of visual narrative to criticize the vain pursuit of luxury, though his focus shifted from fashion's oppression of the working poor to its moral and physical corruption of young girls. On its surface, the painting depicts a little girl playing dress-up in an attic bedroom. The child has lowered her dress and pushed down the bodice of her chemise in an attempt to mimic a décolleté evening gown with a sweeping train. The train in particular captivates her attention, and she smiles admiringly at it over her shoulder. The fall of light across the girl's body and the drape of her dress create the impression of a developing figure, presaging puberty. Indeed, by lowering her dress to the floor, Guy's little girl expresses a wish to be both fashionable and adult. Throughout the nineteenth century, skirt length was one key indicator of maturity in girls. For instance, an 1868 fashion plate from *Harper's Bazaar* shows girls ranging in age from three to sixteen; its legend lists each costume and the ages for which it is appropriate (fig. 3). While the younger girls wear skirts that reach to just below their

knees, the oldest girl wears a dress that—were she standing—would fall nearly (but not quite) to the floor. A girl's first long dress signified her maturity. *Harper's Bazaar* began publication in 1867, the year Guy painted *Making a Train*, and it was the first American fashion magazine to feature fashion plates specifically for children—mostly girls. Such illustrations encouraged girls to identify themselves by age rather than by social class, ethnic group, or region. They also invited girls to participate in the gilded-age culture of self-creation through display. In the new, modern world of cheap commodities, maturity could simply be put on with the right costume. In 1870 a writer for *Putnam's* complained, "The young miss in her first teens, never seen in company in France, and in England appearing, outside of the nursery,

2 Richard Redgrave, *The Sempstress*, 1846 (original version, 1844). Oil on canvas, 25 x 30 in. Private collection. Photo © Christie's Images Limited



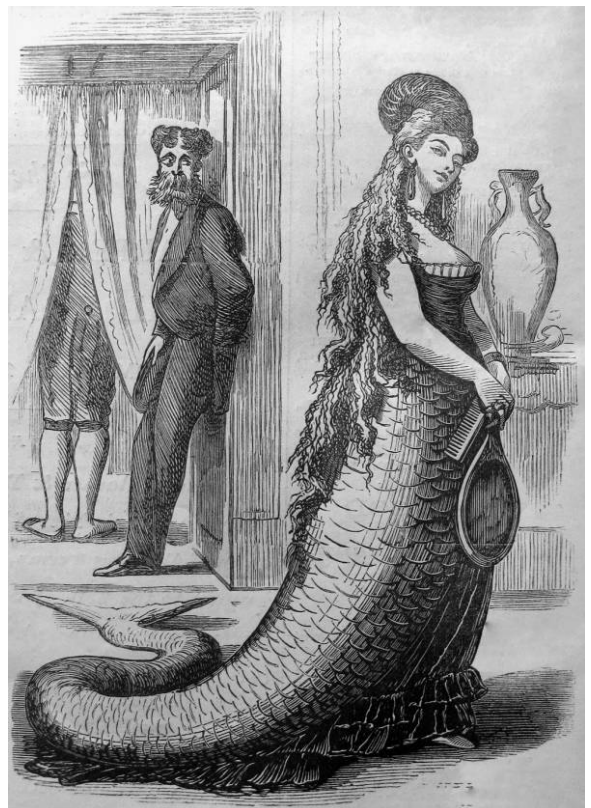


- 3 "Children's Costumes," *Harper's Bazaar*, February 1, 1868, 212
- 4 "The Rise and Fall of Crinoline, XI," *Harper's Bazaar*, March 28, 1868, 349
- 5 "Design from Nature (?)—Toilette du Soir à la Sirène," *Harper's Bazaar*, September 12, 1868, 736

only in short frocks and gypsy hats, here assumes the full-dress of the lady."¹⁴

If fashion was reaching younger audiences in the 1860s, it was also reaching more rural ones. Richard Grant White, father of architect Stanford White, complained in an essay for the *Galaxy* in 1869 of a drift toward greater ostentation by the rich and imitation on the part of the poor as the railroads brought country and city closer together "in time and in opportunity of observation. . . . The publication of such a journal as 'Harper's Baza[a]r,'" he warned, "by carrying fashion-plates, and patterns and descriptions of glorious apparel, with rules to make it withal, into the remotest recesses of the country, will do much to citify people who otherwise would be rustic and respectable."¹⁵

Critics called the little girl in *Making a Train* a "rustic belle," an observation supported by the abundance of plain, handmade goods that surround her.¹⁶ Yet, though she is both rural and a child, she shows an awareness of the very latest fashion trend, the dragging train. The long-popular bell shape of women's skirts began to change in the mid-1860s,



6 Louis Lang, "Nothing to Wear,"
Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper,
 October 17, 1863, cover

7 "Vanity Fair by F. Barzaghi," in
 Phillip T. Sandhurst and others,
*The Great Centennial Exhibition
 Critically Described and Illustr-
 ated* (P. W. Ziegler & Co.,
 1876), 114



becoming less full and lengthening at the back. By the spring of 1867 Paris fashions featured long, sweeping trains. So swiftly did the style spread that, as one American writer commented, "dresses collapse instantly all over the Union."¹⁷ Commenting on this sudden change, *Harper's Bazaar* published a series of satirical cartoons titled "The Rise and Fall of Crinoline." The culmination of the series, in March 1868, depicts a woman struggling to manage her copious, trailing drapery and—in so doing—unintentionally enhancing the curve of her hips and buttocks (fig. 4). Her pose is much like that of Guy's little girl but, being on the street, she is not shielded from the public eye. The gentlemen who stroll past her take frank, admiring notice of her predicament. A few months later, *Harper's Bazaar* again commented satirically on the form-fitting seductiveness of the new dress shape with another cartoon, "Design from Nature (?)—Toilette du Soir à la Sirène" (fig. 5).

The years surrounding the Civil War saw the beginning of a widespread backlash against fashionable dress and the increasingly materialistic culture that supported it: witness William Allen Butler's wildly popular 1857 poem "Nothing to Wear," the humorous, moralizing tale of Miss Flora McFlimsey and her insatiable appetite for new clothes.¹⁸ Louis Lang's 1863 illustration of the poem for *Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* depicts Flora posed much like the girl in *Making a Train* (fig. 6). One sees this self-reflexive pose repeatedly in nineteenth-century images of narcissistic young women and girls. For example, Italian artist Francesco Barzaghi exhibited a sculpture at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia titled *Vanity Fair*—a reference to both John

Bunyan's allegorical condemnation of the sin of pride in *The Pilgrim's Progress* and William Makepeace Thackeray's later novel about a young woman's overweening ambition (fig. 7). So similar is it in both theme and composition that this sculpture might almost have been copied from Guy's painting. In both *Vanity Fair* and *Making a Train*, a young girl's trailing drapery galvanizes her narcissistic attention. Social critics in the



1860s denounced the dragging train, in particular, as a symbol of waste and excess—especially when worn by members of the lower classes. In July 1867 Oliver Wendell Holmes complained, “Why, there isn’t a beast or a bird that would drag its tail through the dirt in the way these creatures do their dresses. Because a queen or a duchess wears long robes on great occasions,” he said, “a maid-of-all-work or a factory girl thinks she must make herself a nuisance by trailing through the street, picking up and carrying about with her!”¹⁹

Girls’ interest in fashion was also seen as potentially unsafe. By the 1880s Guy himself had become an advocate of dress reform, which stressed the importance of freeing young girls from corsets, tight shoes, and long, encumbering dresses. His opinions were perfectly in line with those of contemporary dress reformers like Diocletian Lewis and William

8 Seymour Joseph Guy, *Girl with Jump Rope*, ca. 1865. Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 in. Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine, The Lunder Collection

9 “The Live Corset Doing Its Fatal Work,” from George Napheys, *The Physical Life of Woman: Advice to the Maiden, Wife and Mother* (George MacLean, 1869), n.p.



Alcott. An article published in 1882 in the *Art Amateur* cited Guy as an authority on the subject:

*The curves of the body are all outward curves . . . but the chief curves of the corset are inward curves, which are not only incorrect, but are the source of great damage in compressing unnaturally the organs of the body. . . . It lies greatly with parents to cultivate good forms in their children. These should be regularly accustomed to gymnastics and their muscles strengthened as their bodies develop. Girls trained in this way from childhood would never need corsets.*²⁰

Guy's painting *Girl with Jump Rope* from about 1865, which depicts a rosy-cheeked child catching her breath after vigorous exercise (fig. 8), suggests

that the artist may already have held such views years earlier. By picturing the girl's straw hat casually suspended from the heavy chain door fastener behind her and her jump rope loosely coiled in her left hand, Guy placed her firmly in control of these potential instruments of bondage. By contrast, the helpless girls in contemporaneous dress reform imagery are sometimes shown bound by ropes, chains, and even snakes—a biblical reference explicitly linking the desire for fashionable clothing to original sin (fig. 9).

Particularly in young girls, a desire for fashionable, adult clothing was—many nineteenth-century American reformers believed—potentially damaging to both body and soul. In fact, the urban culture of consumption and display was thought to stimulate premature development and lead to nervous invalidism and reproductive problems in adult life. In his 1869 exposé of sexually suspect female types in New York, *The Women of New York, or the Underworld of the Great City*, George Ellington had this to say about “school girls”:

*The New York fashionable girls! If they haven't beaux, and are not well versed in the art of coquetry at ten years of age, then they are stupid; that is all. It seems as if American parents are not satisfied with the natural stimulus which life in a great city gives, but resort to artificial, hot-house processes to develop their children. . . . Silks, satins, velvets, laces, jewels—things costly enough for a princess. These little wretches are then taken out on to the public parks and exhibited, or they come down the west side of Broadway in shoals. We tremble for their future health and morals.*²¹

Some Americans in the 1860s truly feared that childhood was growing shorter, particularly among urban girls.²² Louisa May Alcott articulated this anxiety in several novels, including the 1869 *An Old Fashioned Girl*, in which Polly, a country child, visits the fashionable Shaw family in Manhattan. She is shocked to find that fourteen-year-old Fanny Shaw, a girl her own age, dresses like an adult, pays calls like a grownup lady, and (surprisingly) keeps company with young men. Only Fanny's grandmother shares Polly's bewilderment at this state of affairs.

*Well, dear, I'll tell you. In my day children of fourteen and fifteen didn't dress in the height of the fashion; go to parties, as nearly like those of grown people as it's possible to make them; lead idle, giddy, unhealthy lives, and get blasé at twenty. We were little folks till eighteen or so; worked and studied, dressed and played, like children; honored our parents; and our days were much longer in the land than now, it seems to me.*²³

As the anthropologist Mary Douglas has observed, cultures tend to associate social ills with ailments of the individual body.²⁴ The disquiet about puberty in girls during the second half of the nineteenth century might be seen, in this light, as an expression of cultural anxiety about the disorienting changes taking place in the American social body, rocked as it was by rapid industrialization, urbanization, and growth.

In his discussion of *Making a Train*, Lubin noted that the child's red and white clothing and blue hair ribbon are significant. With these nationalist colors, he surmised, Guy encouraged viewers to interpret the figure allegorically.²⁵ In particular, I would argue, Guy intended his audience to associate the girl's first halting steps into womanhood with his adopted nation's transformation, for good or ill, from an innocent, agrarian Eden into a modern, cosmopolitan society. Nor is this the only symbolic imagery at work in *Making a Train*. As in Redgrave's *The Sempstress* and William Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience*, many of the objects in Guy's painting bear symbolic meaning. Hunt's painting (which garnered much attention at the Royal Academy in 1854, the same year that Guy left England for the United States) depicts a fallen woman and her seducer in their gaudy love nest (fig. 10). A cat catches a bird beneath the parlor table at left—a vignette that mirrors the relationship between the man and the woman he attempts to hold in his lap. The man's cast-off glove, lying on the carpet in the foreground, prefigures the woman's fate if she fails to free herself from her seducer's grasp. Its vaginal opening also connotes the loss of her virtue; however, her hands—tightly clasped in front of her pelvis—suggest her recommitment to chastity. The popular engraving hanging over the piano, *The Heart's Misgivings*, refers to the woman's own change of heart. At right, her needlepoint on its frame—a metaphor for the illicit life she has made for herself—is unraveling. Even the wallpaper's motif of grapevines and wheat refers to the Eucharist and Christ's forgiveness of repentant sinners. As John Ruskin noted, "There is not a single object in all that room—common, modern, vulgar—but it becomes tragical if rightly read."²⁶ Hunt's painting may have been fresh in Guy's mind in 1867. In an anthology of William Michael Rossetti's art criticism published that year, the respected Pre-Raphaelite praised *The Awakening Conscience* for its "deep earnestness of aim and high quality of execution." Noting that the painting transcended the "trivial literalities" of most contemporary genre painting, he described its symbol-laden composition in detail.²⁷ Whether or not Guy read Rossetti's praise, he was almost certainly aware of Hunt's well-known painting, and he made similar use of moralizing symbolism in *The Votary of Fashion* to condemn the young subject's vain desire for finery. For instance, the little girl steps away from the patchwork quilt behind her and—by extension—her mother's old-fashioned world of handmade goods and honest domestic work. The dishevelment of her room—with her untidily made bed, her drawer hanging open, her suggestively wide-open shoe carelessly discarded in the foreground, her hat and stocking scattered on the floor, and her dolls neglected—suggests the disarray of her future home. As Lubin acknowledged, rumpled beds, open drawers, and cast-off shoes in seventeenth-century Dutch genre scenes also commonly connote a loosening of virtue.²⁸ The still life on the windowsill becomes similarly ominous when one recognizes that the bouquet of orange-red flowers is gathered in a medicine bottle whose curved form echoes the child's body (specifically, her right ear and left shoulder). By emphasizing the bottle in this way, Guy may have intended to suggest the potential toll of the girl's behavior on her adult health. Most significant, Guy included a print after Sir Joshua Reynolds's well-known painting *The Infant Samuel Praying* hanging on the back wall of the garret from only one tack, at precisely the same angle as his subject's head as she turns to admire herself. Samuel looks up to heaven. The girl looks down at her dress. Rather than imitating Samuel's pious

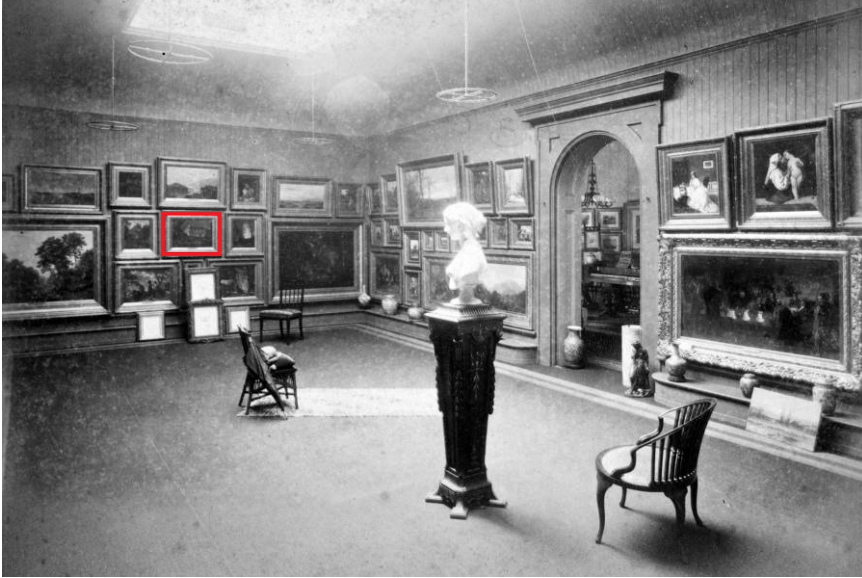


10 William Holman Hunt, *The Awakening Conscience*, 1853. Oil on canvas, 30 x 22 in. Tate Gallery, London. Photo, Tate, London/Art Resource, New York

works in the exhibition, Susan Casteras has noted that most critics found their iconography and underlying philosophy incomprehensible. They focused instead on the painters' attention to naturalistic detail. For instance, a critic for the *Boston Saturday Evening Gazette* missed the significance of the disguised symbols in Pre-Raphaelite pictures and complained, "there is too much crowded into them to allow entirely of pleasing affects." When confronted with Holman Hunt's overtly symbolic *The Light of the World* (1851–53), which depicts Christ standing at the door of a cottage representing the human heart, a writer for the *Albion* noted bluntly, "We dislike allegory, and religious allegory most of all."³¹ Furthermore, American audiences objected to the hard-biting social criticism that pervaded many British genre paintings, preferring more optimistic and sentimental images.³² Given the poor understanding of (and aversion to) the symbolism and social critique common in Victorian art by audiences on this side of the Atlantic, it is not surprising that critics interpreted *Making a Train* literally—as a story about a little girl playing dress-up—rather than allegorically—as a morality tale about the corrupting influence of fashion and the dangers of rapid development.

example by kneeling to say her prayers, she is, as the painting's original title suggests, worshipping at the altar of a false god.

Despite the insistent iconography of Guy's painting and its seemingly clear references to social problems that concerned many Americans, George Sheldon wrote of the artist in 1881: "[Guy] is a genre painter almost exclusively, a painter of scenes in American domestic life, an historian in a sense, but never a moralist."²⁹ Indeed, as both Lubin and scholar Amy Werbel have noted, critics seemed initially unaware of any worrying message in *Making a Train*. Writers from the 1860s through the 1880s stressed the sweetness and innocence of its young subject, referring only obliquely (if at all) to the painting's disturbing social content. It is difficult to account for viewers' inability to read Guy's moralizing theme, but one explanation may lie in the fact that his American audience did not fully understand or appreciate the literary, symbol-laden language of Victorian social realism.³⁰ As David Bindman has recently observed, no extensive study has yet been written on American attitudes toward British art in the nineteenth century. Still, critical reactions to a loan exhibition of British paintings that traveled to various East Coast cities in 1857 and 1858 shed light on the ways American audiences understood Victorian art at that time (admittedly ten years before Guy debuted *Making a Train*). Of the Pre-Raphaelite



11 Interior of George Whitney's gallery from *The Whitney Collection* scrapbook, ca. 1885. George Whitney Papers relating to William Trost Richards, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Like Eastman Johnson's *The Old Stage Coach* (1871), which Whitney also owned and displayed on an adjacent wall, *Making a Train* paid tribute to the system of American railroads that Whitney and his father, Asa Whitney, had helped to create. Not only had these railroads displaced inefficient and less comfortable modes of transportation such as stagecoaches, they also brought both the knowledge of fashion and fashionable goods themselves into the American countryside. Far from condemning the dreams of wealth and status that the little girl in *Making a Train* entertains, Whitney most likely embraced them as quintessentially American. Critics certainly held this view. One asserted that the child is "studying her part for a higher position upon the world's stage." Another suggested that she is playing Cinderella, a fairy tale echoed by the popular rags-to-riches children's stories that Horatio Alger began publishing in 1867.³⁴ In the 1860s and 1870s most Americans were reluctant to view the social ambitions of a pretty white child as morally suspect. Indeed, despite earnest protests by reformers, Americans increasingly believed that identity was constructed, not by demonstrations of moral character, but through the purchase and display of material possessions. Although many viewed fashionable dress as ridiculous, and some believed it was immoral and dangerous, most embraced fashion as an indispensable signifier of one's social position.³⁵ A cartoon published in *Harper's Bazaar* satirizes this new, sanguine acceptance of conspicuous consumption. In "Last New Thing in Skirts," a young woman wearing a ball gown with a low neckline and elaborate train turns to admire the sweep of her ruffled and beribboned gown (fig. 12). Her shocked aunt exclaims, "Why, Child, all your Clothes are Falling Off!" to which she blithely replies, "Oh, dear, no, Aunt; it's the Fashion!"

Retitled and ensconced in Whitney's private gallery, *Making a Train* could be viewed by Whitney's family and guests as well as those members of the public who presented a calling card at his door. The enthusiastic response of at least one visitor can be surmised from a letter Guy wrote to Whitney in January 1885, in which the artist related that a "gentleman from the west . . . after visiting your gallery" had been so struck by *Making a Train* that he wrote to Guy requesting a similar picture for himself, "under a different effect of candlelight." Guy ended his letter, "I hope my little ones, which you have so fondly adopted and kindly introduced to your many friends and visitors, keep in good condition."³⁶ It is unknown whether Guy painted a version of *Making a Train* for his

Railroad car manufacturer George Whitney further altered the painting's meaning after he purchased it in 1868 by discarding its original, sardonic title in favor of the more optimistic (and self-referential) *Making a Train*. No doubt Whitney intended the new title, which he bestowed on the painting before sending it to the 1868 annual exhibition of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, as a playful tribute to his own success. After all, making trains was how he maintained his fortune—a fortune made evident by the large art collection he displayed in a private gallery in his fashionable Philadelphia home.³³ Despite its modest size, Guy's painting held a prominent place in this gallery—the center of the back wall in this photograph (fig. 11).

correspondent, but he had already painted at least one other version in 1870, featuring a slightly older girl (fig. 13), presumably for another admirer of Whitney's painting. In *Making Believe*, Guy dispensed with dress reform ideals and moralizing symbolism. With the exception of the girl's cast-off shoe, the iconographic details that surround the child in *Making a Train* have been stripped away. Although the adolescent subject's breast is now covered, the painting is, if anything, more eroticized. Because the corseted girl stands much closer to the picture plane, she fills more of the canvas. Rather than seeming to watch her from the shadows at the far edge of the room, the viewer is now close enough to touch her. The girl's stockings, with a pink garter still attached, lie abandoned in the foreground, projecting with trompe l'oeil verisimilitude into the viewer's space. Based on Guy's changes, it is possible to make informed guesses about what the commissioner of *Making Believe* appreciated most about *Making a Train* and what alterations he requested from the artist. Guy, whose original moralizing message failed to make an impression on his audience, seems to have been willing to adapt subsequent versions to his buyers' desires.

In December 1885 Whitney's collection was auctioned at the American Art Galleries in New York. Whitney had died unexpectedly just a few months earlier, leaving his family with enormous debts. The sale succeeded in keeping Whitney's creditors at bay, but it was otherwise an unmitigated disaster. Both American and European paintings sold for one-tenth of their appraised values. Tastes had changed, and several reviewers singled out *Making a Train* as representative of everything that was old-fashioned about Whitney's collection as a whole. In particular, it is tightly painted and minutely detailed, and these qualities heighten the disturbing physicality of the little girl. One critic referred obliquely to the child's budding sexuality by describing her as "deliciously innocent," noting, "Her chemise has fallen from her shoulders, displaying the prettiest little figure in the world."

Of the objects in the painting he suggested, "To see how perfectly every detail is realized, let the viewer stereoscope it by closing one eye in looking at it. One could absolutely crawl under the bed, sit on the chair (having once removed the lamp) or look out of the dormer window into the night."³⁷ The trope of stereography is revealing. It implies an intimate, highly experiential relation between the viewer and the image. The objects in Guy's painting, like those seen through a stereoscope, have a tangible physicality that marks them as commodities. Indeed, six years earlier Earl Shinn, writing as Edward Strahan, had savaged another painting by Guy, *Bedtime Story* (1876), which depicts an adolescent girl reading to her



12 "Last New Thing in Skirts,"
Harper's Bazaar, July 4, 1868, 576

13 Seymour Joseph Guy, *Making Believe*, 1870. Oil on canvas, 15 3/16 x 12 3/16 in. Private collection



small brothers, by comparing it to a veritable shopping list of merchandise: “The good sister, who entertains the others, is put together like a Chinese puzzle. . . . Mr. Guy has long since learned to imitate all the rich repertory of Japanese enamels in his small figure paintings. ‘Aventurine’ and ‘Soo-chow’ and ‘Foo-chow’ . . . which resembles the porous firmness of new kid gloves.”³⁸ The blurred line between girls and material goods had become distasteful in the social climate of the 1880s.

Illustrations like “The Buzzard in Dove’s Plumes” (fig. 14), which appeared in the *National Police Gazette* in 1882, highlight the degree to which sexualized little girls and the pedophiles who sought them out had entered the realm of public discourse. Here, a prostitute of indeterminate age impersonates a fashionably dressed twelve-year-old girl, attracting the attention of a dandy who has creepily positioned himself near the door of a



14 “The Buzzard in Dove’s Plumes: How Graduates in Vice Masquerade as School-Girls and Snare Unwary Men with Arts Borrowed from Innocent Childhood,” *National Police Gazette*, February 25, 1882, 231

school. The accompanying text relates: “She was at first glance a type of the modern school girl born of these extravagant times. . . . Her appearance altogether was well calculated to excite the attention the artist bestowed upon her, and more than one pedestrian stopped to stare at her as she passed.”³⁹ The writer of this tabloid article did not question the notion that young girls were routinely ogled by grown men on the street and that ostentatious clothing exacerbated this problem. Rather, he assumed that the girl’s apparent youth and attention to fashion increased her value as a sexual commodity. Throughout the mid-1880s reformers—including members of the New York Committee for the Prevention of State Regulation of Vice and the powerful Women’s Christian Temperance Union—campaigns loudly to raise the age of consent in New York. Just a few weeks after the Whitney sale, an editorial appearing in the pages of the *Philanthropist* raged, “It will doubtless astonish many of our readers, who have hitherto avoided the subject as indelicate, or painful, to be told that the young girl of the Empire State is held by its criminal laws to be capable of giving ‘consent’ to her own corruption at the tender age of TEN YEARS!”⁴⁰ If a cultural belief in unassailable childhood innocence had veiled the eroticism of *Making a Train* when it was first exhibited

in the late 1860s, that veil was lifting in the 1880s, when stories of girls lured into prostitution began appearing in the popular press. Removed from its domestic context in the Whitney home and placed in the salesrooms of the American Art Galleries, where it was offered to the highest bidder, Guy’s painting could easily have stirred uncomfortable echoes of such stories in the minds of viewers. Having begun as a moral homily about the dangers of cheap commodities for young girls, *Making a Train* may now have conjured the disturbing specter of young girls themselves having become commodities.

Though many viewers have seen in *Making a Train* an image of a precociously sexualized child, they have lacked the proper context with which to understand Guy’s intended instructive use of this imagery. Without knowing Guy’s original title, *The Votary* (or *Votaresse*) of Fashion, the literary references and moralizing symbolism within the painting are difficult to decipher. Indeed, even after hearing the painting’s first title, presumably from the artist’s lips, New York critics in 1868 either missed or willfully ignored Guy’s didactic message about the corrupting influence of fashion on little girls and described instead a simple and charming vignette of innocent childhood. Of course, what viewers described in print is not necessarily all that they saw in *Making a Train*. The eroticism of Guy’s painting, while not explicitly acknowledged, was most likely noticed—appreciatively by those who privately requested copies of *Making a Train* from the artist after seeing it in Whitney’s gallery, and with discomfort by at least some who viewed it in the 1885 American Art Galleries salesrooms. Nineteenth-century American viewers apparently did not read the picture allegorically, searching its many details for a narrative and symbols related to pressing social problems and taking from it a moral lesson. Whatever prompted Guy to look back to the Victorian social realism he remembered from his youth as he painted this small canvas, he must have recognized that experiment as—on at least one level—a failure, even though the painting itself was a critical and commercial success and stands as an artistic tour de force.

Notes

- 1 "In the Studios," *New York Commercial Advertiser*, March 31, 1868, 2.
- 2 Guy exhibited his painting in his studio in the spring of 1868 before sending it to Philadelphia. While reviewers for the *Commercial Advertiser* and *New York Herald* gave the title as *The Votary of Fashion*, a reviewer for *Putnam's* called it *The Votaress of Fashion*. "Fine Arts," *Putnam's Magazine* 1 (May 1868): 646. In Philadelphia, the painting appears to have always been known as *Making a Train*, and it was published as such in Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, *Catalogue of the Forty-fifth Annual Exhibition* (Philadelphia: Collins, 1868), 17, no. 244. For its recent exhibition, see H. Barbara Weinberg and Carrie Rebora Barratt, eds., *American Stories: Paintings of Everyday Life, 1765–1915* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009).
- 3 "Notes on Art," *New York Herald*, March 22, 1868, 6.
- 4 David Lubin, *Picturing a Nation: Art and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1994), 210, 220, 223–25. Margaret C. Conrads has perceptively added that the painting also wistfully evokes the girl's impending loss of innocence; see Conrads, "Stories of War and Reconciliation, 1860–1877," in Weinberg and Barratt, *American Stories*, 98. Indeed, though the erotic content of the painting was unarticulated, it was probably perceived; throughout most of the nineteenth century child prostitution was rampant in New York. See Lubin, 218; and Timothy A. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790–1920* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992), 285–87.
- 5 I follow Susan P. Casteras's definition of a Victorian "problem picture" as a painting that invites viewers to study its imagery and speculate about its meaning; see Casteras, *Images of Victorian Womanhood in English Art* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1987), 33–40. I am grateful to Terri Sabatos, associate professor, U.S. Military Academy, West Point, for pointing out to me the relation between *Making a Train* and Victorian problem pictures.
- 6 Robert Pollock, *The Course of Time: A Poem in Ten Books* (Hartford, Conn.: Silas Andrus & Son, 1846), 233.
- 7 Nemo [Henry Gardiner Adams], "Fashion's Votaress," in *The Ocean Queen and Other Poems* (Chatham, Eng.: E. Etherington, 1836), 161–64.
- 8 George Elliot, *Adam Bede* (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers' Company, 1884), 139.
- 9 Mrs. J. H. Higginson lent Guy's painting *Shakespeare*, now unlocated, to the Brooklyn Art Association in 1872. *Songs of Innocence*, also currently unlocated, was owned by the Alexander Gallery, New York, in 1981 and reproduced in the *Magazine Antiques* 119, no. 5 (May 1981): 983. See Smithsonian American Art Museum, Inventory of American Painting and Sculpture, at www.siris.si.edu (accessed July 24, 2010).
- 10 See Julian Treuherz, *Hard Times: Social Realism in Victorian Art* (Manchester: City Galleries, 1987). For biographical information about Guy that seems to have come directly from the artist, see G. W. Sheldon, *American Painters: With One Hundred and Four Examples of Their Work Engraved on Wood* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1881), 65–70. See also David Dearing, *Painting and Sculpture in the National Academy of Design, Vol. 1, 1826–1925* (Manchester, Vt.: Hudson Hills Press, for the National Academy of Design, 2004), 243; and T. B. Thorpe, "Painters of the Century: No. VIII, Our Successful Artists—S. J. Guy," *Baldwin's Monthly* 13 (August 1876): 1.
- 11 Redgrave made at least one copy of *The Sempstress* (fig. 2) for Lord Northwick of Cheltenham in 1846. A painting by Redgrave entitled *The Song of the Shirt* (possibly another copy or the original version of *The Sempstress*) sold at Winstanley's auction house, London, April 21, 1852; see Richard Beresford, *Victorian Visions: Nineteenth-Century Art from the John Schaeffer Collection* (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2010), 22–25, 158–59.
- 12 Thomas Hood, "Song of the Shirt," *Punch, or the London Charivari*, December 16, 1843. I am grateful to Terri Sabatos for pointing out to me the comparison between *Making a Train* and Redgrave's painting.
- 13 For a discussion of the critique of fashion in Victorian Britain, see Beth Harris, ed., *Famine and Fashion: Needlewomen in the Nineteenth Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), esp. Susan P. Casteras, "Weary Stitches: Illustrations and Paintings for Thomas Hood's 'Song of the Shirt' and Other Poems," 13–40. For a contemporaneous description of Redgrave's *Fashion's Slaves*, see "The Exhibition of the Royal Academy," *Sharpe's London Magazine*, June 12, 1847, 108.
- 14 Schele De Vere, "American Dress," *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* 30 (April 1870): 390.
- 15 Richard Grant White, "The Unsociables of Society," *Galaxy* 8 (September 1869): 414.
- 16 E[arl] S[hinn], "Private Art Collections of Philadelphia," *Lippincott's Magazine of Popular Literature and Science*, December 1872, 709.
- 17 De Vere, "American Dress," 392.
- 18 [William Allen Butler], "Nothing to Wear: An Episode in City Life," *Harper's Weekly*, February 2, 1857, 84. The poem was reprinted and illustrated many times, including publication as a short book in 1862; see Butler, *Nothing to Wear: An Episode of City Life* (New York: John Bradburn, 1862). Conrads, "Stories of War and Reconciliation," 110 n. 101, observed that the original title of *Making a Train* links the painting to the widespread mid-nineteenth-century American critique of materialism.
- 19 Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Home and Foreign Gossip," *Harper's Weekly*, July 13, 1867, 439.
- 20 See Patricia A. Cunningham, *Politics, Health, and Art: Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850–1920* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State Univ. Press, 2003), 75–101; and Sally Helvenston, "Advice to American Mothers on the Subject of Children's Dress: 1800–1920," *Dress* 7 (1981): 31–46. For the quote from Guy, see Mary Gay Humphreys, "Art in Dress," *Art Amateur* 6 (January 1882): 42–44, at 42.
- 21 George Ellington, *The Women of New York, or the Underworld of the Great City* (1869; New York: Arno Press, 1972), 191.

- 22 On the anxieties surrounding female adolescence, see Jane Hunter, *How Young Ladies Became Girls: The Victorian Origins of American Girlhood* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2002); and Crista Deluzio, *Female Adolescence in American Scientific Thought, 1830–1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2007).
- 23 Louisa May Alcott, *An Old Fashioned Girl* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1911), 12.
- 24 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (New York: Praeger, 1966).
- 25 Lubin, *Picturing a Nation*, 227–30.
- 26 For an analysis of *The Awakening Conscience* and the reactions it provoked, see Judith Bronkhurst, *William Holman Hunt: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2006), 1:165–68. John Ruskin, letter to the *London Times*, dated May 25, 1854, cited in E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, eds., *The Works of John Ruskin* (London: George Allen, 1905), 12:333–35.
- 27 William Michael Rossetti, *Fine Art, Chiefly Contemporary: Notices Re-printed, with Revisions* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1867), 240–41.
- 28 For the symbolism of shoes, see E. de Jongh, *Questions of Meaning: Theme and Motif in Dutch Seventeenth-Century Painting* (Leiden: Primavera Pers, 2000), 33–34, 74. Noting that U.S. critics failed to mention these iconographic allusions, Lubin, *Picturing a Nation*, 234, speculated that by the 1860s their meaning “may have been lost from public memory.” In England, however, a tradition of symbolic imagery of this type extends from William Hogarth forward into the nineteenth century and can be seen in paintings by Redgrave, Holman Hunt, and Augustus Leopold Egg, among others.
- 29 Sheldon, *American Painters*, 69.
- 30 Lubin, *Picturing a Nation*, 210, 220, 223–25; Amy Werbel, *Thomas Eakins: Art, Medicine, and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2007), 110–11. Even in England, viewers had difficulty with the dense symbolism and disturbing subject matter of Hunt’s *The Awakening Conscience*; see Bronkhurst, *Holman Hunt*, 167; and Casteras, *Images of Victorian Womanhood*, 140–42.
- 31 See David Bindman, “Americans in London: Contemporary History Painting Revisited,” in *English Accents: Interactions with British Art, ca. 1776–1855*, ed. Christiana Payne and William Vaughan (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2004), 9; Susan P. Casteras, “The 1857–58 Exhibition of English Art in America and Critical Responses to Pre-Raphaelitism,” in *The New Path: Ruskin and the American Pre-Raphaelites*, ed. Linda S. Ferber and William H. Gerdtz (New York: Brooklyn Museum, 1985), 109–33; “Boston Athenaeum Exhibition,” *Boston Saturday Evening Gazette*, April 24, 1858, 2; and “Fine Arts: American Exhibition of British Art,” *Albion*, October 31, 1857, 525. Guy was not a member of the American Pre-Raphaelite group, The Society for the Advancement of Truth in Art, nor is there any evidence he considered himself a Pre-Raphaelite. Rather, his approach in *Making a Train* overlaps with the work of certain Pre-Raphaelite artists like Holman Hunt who employed moralizing symbolic imagery, a practice common in Victorian art.
- 32 See Martin Berger, “Sentimental Realism in Thomas Eakins’s Late Portraits,” in *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture*, ed. Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1999), 245–48.
- 33 For Whitney’s collection, see Linda S. Ferber, *Tokens of a Friendship: Miniature Watercolors by William T. Richards from the Richard and Gloria Manney Collection* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1982); and George Whitney Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Also see Emily D. Shapiro’s essay in this issue, esp. 86–88.
- 34 “In the Studios,” *New York Commercial Advertiser*, March 31, 1868, 2. “Fine Arts,” *Putnam’s Magazine* 1 (May 1868): 646.
- 35 I am grateful to David Lubin for sharing his insights on consumerist and anticonsumerist rhetoric in the post-Civil War period and how these entangled discourses may have affected the reception of *Making a Train*. See also Lori Merish, *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2000); and Michael Barton, “The Victorian Jeremiad: Critics of Accumulation and Display,” in *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America, 1880–1920*, ed. Simon J. Bronner (Winterthur, Del.: Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1989), 55–71.
- 36 Seymour Joseph Guy to George Whitney, January 30, 1885, quoted in Ferber, *Tokens of a Friendship*, 26. Whitney owned several other paintings by Guy.
- 37 Newspaper clippings, in Whitney Papers, reel 2029, frames 83–85. “[D]eliciously innocent” appears in “The Whitney Collection: Impressions Gained from a Private View of the Pictures from a Staff Correspondent of the Press,” frame 83.
- 38 Edward Strahan [Earl Shinn], “The National Academy of Design: First Notice,” *Art Amateur*, June 1879, 4. *Bedtime Story* is a near copy of Guy’s earlier painting *The Story of Golden Locks* (ca. 1870), but the adolescent subject of *Bedtime Story* wears a brown dress rather than a nightgown. See Lee M. Edwards, *Domestic Bliss: Family Life in American Painting, 1840–1910* (Westchester, N.Y.: Hudson River Museum, 1986), 57, 104, 106.
- 39 “The Buzzard in Dove’s Plumes,” *National Police Gazette*, February 25, 1882, 231.
- 40 “Legal Protection for Young Girls,” *New York Philanthropist*, January 1886, 4. On purity crusades and age of consent legislation, see Mary E. Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885–1920* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1995). See also Gretchen Sennett, “Envisioning Female Adolescence: Rites of Passage in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century American Painting” (PhD diss., Univ. of Pennsylvania, 2006).