

The Avant-Garde in Interwar England: Medieval Modernism and the London Underground.

By Michael T. Saler. New York: Oxford UP, 1999. 242 pp. \$39.95.

The title of Michael T. Saler's book on visual modernism may strike some readers as too long and obscure, but in fact it should be even longer and more obscure. The name of Frank Pick, a London executive unknown to virtually all scholars of the interwar period, belongs somewhere on the title page. The most wide-reaching arguments of Saler's book really grow out of his portrayal of Pick as leader of the English historical avant-garde. Saler's extensive research and provocative reconstruction of a corporate avant-garde may not earn Pick many more admirers, but it should earn him a more visible role in scholarly books on the period. More importantly, it should earn Saler praise for so radically shifting the terms that scholars can use to talk about interwar English culture and industry.

Saler is an intellectual historian and he is most interested in analyzing interwar discourse rather than interwar artifacts. This bias means that he does not scrutinize individual works that represent "medieval modernism." Instead, he provides us with a fascinating account of a particular way of thinking about relations between art and society that grew out of the romantic medievalism of William Morris and John Ruskin and was espoused most effectively by Pick, but also by Herbert Read, William Rothenstein, and others. To buy Saler's argument that medieval modernism, rather than the familiar Bloomsbury formalism of Fry and Bell, represents the true English avant-garde, one must first accept Saler's championing of Pick, who is, unfortunately, the kind of man no one would want for either boss or husband. Lonely, socially awkward, autocratic, and work-obsessed, Pick was driven by a missionary zeal inherited from his northern nonconformist upbringing to convert the "chaos" of London into a socially and industrially organic, planned city. The modern art and design that Pick brought to Underground posters, statues, and even station architecture was to be the means by which such transformation would take place. Interpreting the abstractions of modern art as signs of essential, eternal rhythms and underlying universal structures, Pick believed that commercial art and design could best fulfill the medieval modernist expectation that art be "essentially a thing of action, the practical means of accomplishing some purpose"

(19). Like medieval craftsmen, industrial workers would collectively create “art” that testified to a spiritualized capitalism and produced a stronger, richer, more unified nation.

Pick’s positions as a chief executive with the London Underground, as chairman and president of the Design and Industries Association, and as chairman of the government’s Council for Art and Industry, allowed him to promote the work of his protégé, poster artist E. McKnight Kauffer, architect Charles Holden, sculptors Eric Gill, Henry Moore, and Jacob Epstein, among others. To show how far Pick was willing to go to defend modern art in the late 1920s, Saler points to the fact that Pick commissioned and defended Epstein’s controversial “Day” and “Night” for the Underground’s new Broadway headquarters even though he, Pick, disliked Epstein’s work. Pick’s support of Epstein and other modern artists leads Saler to conclude that “Through the efforts of medieval modernists, the London Underground became the culminating project of the arts and crafts movement” (61).

It’s always exciting to encounter ideas that challenge so thoroughly and coherently the most familiar stories about the important contours and figures of English interwar culture, and scholars of the period, whether experts on history, literature, politics, or art, should read this book. Once the book is widely read, however, the following questions should be among those that shape future debate about the English historical avant-garde.

First, Saler’s nomination of Pick as the primary champion of the English avant-garde rests on a dubious repression of Peter Burger’s claim that “A literature [or art] whose primary aim it is to impose a particular kind of consumer behavior on the reader is in fact practical, though not in the sense the avant-gardistes intended. Here, literature [or art] ceases to be an instrument of emancipation and becomes one of subjection” (54). The Underground’s statues, buildings, and especially poster art that Saler names as the material testaments to medieval modernism’s discursive triumphs were wedded to commodity aesthetics. Their purpose was, ultimately, commercial. This economic motive needs to be underscored even as readers are persuaded that Pick used modern art and design to promote the Underground because he sincerely wanted to expand the pleasures of art to a mass public in need of spiritual sustenance and affordable transportation. The conflict between Burger’s and Saler’s understanding of avant-garde purpose is symbolized by Kauffer’s Underground poster “Winter Sales,” which is reproduced in the book. The poster’s abstract design is intended to advertise the idea that “Winter Sales are best reached by Underground” (42). Although Saler addresses other elements of Burger’s theory that he finds cumbersome, he does not really confront the problem

of using Burger to argue for an avant-garde hero who worked on behalf of corporate profits and the maintenance of capitalist, bourgeois economic and social forms.

A second and related question is why “ordinary” (non-intellectual?) history is so peripheral to Saler’s study. The dynamic, near-revolutionary social and political upheavals that are vividly represented by classic and recent studies of English art in the interwar period are nearly invisible in Saler’s account. There is little to no mention of the impact on interwar English intellectuals and artists of mass unemployment, Leftist politics, the suffragist movement, anti-imperialist agitation, the British Union of Fascists, or Irish rebellion. Even the outbreak of World War II seems relatively unimportant for Saler outside of its hard lessons about the inadequacy of English light-metal industries. One assumes that these violent contexts for medieval modernism are not important for Saler because his research suggests that the English avant-garde “promoted a very ‘English,’ gradualist vision of social change” (9). This conclusion may strike scholars of, say, England’s working class as odd, but it is not surprising given Saler’s focus on the function of art in mainstream bourgeois institutions (e.g., the Underground, the potteries and textile industries, art schools). Saler’s book might honor the period’s equally ‘English’ but more volatile political history if he addressed challenges to medieval modernism posed by groups whose ideas about the relation of art and society were more radical than those of the Bloomsbury crowd. While treatment of such groups might interrupt the gratifying momentum of Saler’s story, it would allow readers to see the historical movements and discourses that involved more directly the masses that Pick’s Underground art was supposed to inspire, transform, and improve.

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