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Idols Of Perversity: Fantasies Of Feminine Evil In Fin-de-Si cle Culture (Oxford Paperbacks)



Synopsis

At the turn of the century, an unprecedented attack on women erupted in virtually every aspect of culture: literary, artistic, scientific, and philosophic. Throughout Europe and America, artists and intellectuals banded together to portray women as static and unindividuated beings who functioned solely in a sexual and reproductive capacity, thus formulating many of the anti-feminine platitudes that today still constrain women's potential. Bram Dijkstra's *Idols of Perversity* explores the nature and development of turn-of-the-century misogyny in the works of hundreds of writers, artists, and scientists, including Zola, Strindberg, Wedekind, Henry James, Rossetti, Renoir, Moreau, Klimt, Darwin, and Spencer. Dijkstra demonstrates that the most prejudicial aspects of Evolutionary Theory helped to justify this wave of anti-feminine sentiment. The theory claimed that the female of the species could not participate in the great evolutionary process that would guide the intellectual male to his ultimate, predestined role as a disembodied spiritual essence. Darwinists argued that women hindered this process by their willingness to lure men back to a sham paradise of erotic materialism. To protect the male's continued evolution, artists and intellectuals produced a flood of pseudo-scientific tracts, novels, and paintings which warned the world's males of the evils lying beneath the surface elegance of woman's tempting skin. Reproducing hundreds of pictures from the period and including in-depth discussions of such key works as *Dracula* and *Venus in Furs*, this fascinating book not only exposes the crucial links between misogyny then and now, but also connects it to the racism and anti-semitism that led to catastrophic genocidal delusions in the first half of the twentieth century. Crossing the conventional boundaries of art history, sociology, the history of scientific theory, and literary analysis, Dijkstra unveils a startling view of a grim and largely one-sided war on women still being fought today.

Book Information

Series: Oxford Paperbacks

Paperback: 480 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press (September 29, 1988)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0195056523

ISBN-13: 978-0195056525

Product Dimensions: 10 x 0.9 x 7.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 2.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars Â Â See all reviews Â (18 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #248,799 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #18 in Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Movements & Periods > Victorian #39 in Books > Arts & Photography > History & Criticism > Themes > Women in Art #101 in Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Regional & Cultural > United States > African American

Customer Reviews

Dijkstra's book is a wonderful dissection of the sexual subtexts of late-Victorian art, a genre packed with very telling and, by our standards, near-pornographic images under the guise of religious or mythological subjects. Analysing art that was designed to titillate - and frankly, still does - is a difficult brief. But in my view, Dijkstra successfully avoids a "Look how disgusting this is!" tone, and provides an insight into the many female stereotypes in Victorian art: temptresses, vampires, victims, invalids, degenerates, and more. My one major criticism is that the text too blatantly pushes Dijkstra's interpretations of the paintings ("Was this woman [looking at a goldfish bowl] ... seeing something more than just the goldfish swimming aimlessly in a circle? ... Wasn't she also a goldfish herself, and wasn't her environment, to a large extent, the goldfish bowl of her own "useless existence"? No wonder, then ... her melancholy expression"). In my view, this polemic tone weakens Dijkstra's point. The pictures, which are well supported by quotes from contemporary fiction and other sources, speak perfectly well about the weirdness of the late-Victorian male psyche.

This book reproduces hundreds of the most beautiful, eccentric, and unique paintings and sculptures ever made, complete with a marvelously entertaining commentary that "reveals" the sinister, patriarchal threat of each. The greatest surprise is the obscurity yet quality of these works--you won't see them reproduced in any other art book, yet they are too entertaining and (sometimes) just plain daffy to deserve oblivion. Since subject matter is all that interests Mr. Dijkstra, they are unfortunately all in black and white, but the bold expressiveness of the compositions makes this only a minor flaw. Almost as rich as this aesthetic feast is Mr. Dijkstra's commentary. Are you amused by 19th Century Puritanical screeds, right-wing condemnation of the Arts, or the Nazis' blather about "degenerate art"? If so, this scholar's views will be a revelation: a dour, fanatical, left-wing perspective! He has great insights into 19th Century culture, psychology, and "sexual politics," and these increase tenfold your enjoyment of the art. But I was most delighted by his hilarious extremism, his intolerance for anything that won't fit within a microscopic window of "political correctness." The self-righteousness, the delusions (he describes a bucolic scene of frolicking cherubs as a harbinger of the Holocaust) and the choking fury he expends at long-dead

paupers are a once-in-a-lifetime thrill. Thank you, Mr. Dijkstra! Beyond a doubt, the most memorable art critique I've ever read.

Terrific book....along the lines of "Crime and Destiny" loaded with tons of illustrations and written in a clarity that is not overtly academic, best I have read (twice) this year, get it rather than some rock bio(?) this is a perfect effort...Dal Lazlo (crime art expert)

If you have read Nordau's *-Degeneration-*, you will find that the most appealing part of that tome to the present day reader will be the fact that it serves as admirable Baedeker to the highlights of late 19th century (mostly French) literature. It does so in the form of a moralistic tract, founded in the public-healthism of Nordau's era, and specifically Cesare Lombroso's attempt to create a "science" of what might be best termed as forensic phrenology. [Lombroso maintained that criminals displayed hereditary "atavistic" traits, and that therefore by looking for facial features he deemed "atavistic," criminal tendencies could be weeded out of the population. Nordau then applied Lombroso's criteria to identify many literary titans as atavistic moral degenerates.] More people may be familiar with Mario Praz's *-The Romantic Agony-*, again a tract tinged with moral hostility against the stasis and cruelty of "decadence," that once again serves as a lovely field guide to Symbolist and late Romantic poetry. Praz, perhaps fortunately for his present reputation, sticks with non-falsifiable and purely artistic criticisms. The point here is that Nordau's and Praz's books in fact add relish and anticipation to the literary works they describe despite their moralistic thunders against them. It's applying reverse psychology to the Paglia/Spenser effect --- for Camille Paglia's *-Sexual Personae-*, whatever other merits or demerits it may have, has won more readers for Spenser's *-Faerie Queene-* these past several years than the poem probably had over the past century. *-Idols of Perversity-* purports to analyze images from late 19th century art in the light of feminist doctrine, with an eye to the (rather obvious) thesis that these figures represent male sexual fantasies, often misogynistic, and not flesh and blood women. Unlike most other tracts of cultural criticism that start from the moral assumptions of identity politics, Dijkstra's at least has the merit of actually persuading its readers that the hypothesis it wishes to develop is true. On the other hand, the moralizing tone of the work gives it a place on the same shelf as Nordau and Praz; more so because the book is of necessity handsomely illustrated with dozens of interesting fantasy paintings, many by largely forgotten artists --- the fact, of course, that first attracted my attention to it in the first place. If you have any interest in these pictures at all, *-Idols-* is a handy reference guide, and Dijkstra's text serves the ironic purpose of making the pictures seem that much more wickedly

fun, just as his distinguished predecessors do.

Outstanding book! Well-researched, entertaining for those who want to know better women's history since the beginning of time. It mostly revolves around mid-nineteenth century England, but the analysis of the historical events, literature and art of the time gives it an incredible amount of credibility. I am using it for my M.A thesis in English Lit. and it has proven to be a great source of information!

Terrific book....along the lines of "Crime and Destiny" loaded with tons of illustrations and written in a clarity that is not overtly academic , best I have read (twice) this year, get it rather than some rock bio(?) this is a perfect effort...Dal Lazlo (crime art expert)

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