

The Art of the Peacock

by Gail Leggio

There is nothing understated about the peacock, a big, richly colored bird with an outsized tail, which it brandishes in one of nature's more extravagant courtship displays. Traditionally, artists have sought beauty, but beauty comes in many forms. For a few decades on either side of the turn of the twentieth century, the beauty of the peacock—that blatantly gorgeous and rather peculiar creature—triumphed. "Strut: The Peacock and Beauty in Art," an exuberant recent exhibition at the Hudson River Museum, focused on that period, although a smattering of earlier examples and a good-sized selection of contemporary works rounded out the survey. The lively, wide-ranging catalogue explores various aspects of the phenomenon, providing context for the 150 objects on display.

Where does the peacock's glamour lie, in its distinctive shape or its

sapphire-blue and emerald-green colors? The show featured works by two masters, Louis Comfort Tiffany and Aubrey Beardsley, who—rather than presenting the bird literally—distill its aesthetic essence. The two Tiffany lamps in the exhibition, dated c. 1900 and 1910, have domed shades with stylized peacock-feather eyes in almost-expressionistic configurations. Curator Laura Vookles compares them to crazy quilts and Japanese "cracked ice" objets



Edward Lycett

Vase, 1886–90

Collection of Michael and
Marjorie Loeb

Photography: Taylor Dabney

COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY
OF RICHMOND MUSEUMS
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA



Jessie Arms Botke, *Black Peacock*, c. 1930

COURTESY OF ASSOCIATED ARTISTS, SOUTHPORT, CONNECTICUT

d'art.¹ The peacock feather is even more attenuated in Tiffany's Favrile glass vessels, such as a bulbous-shouldered vase (c. 1896) with op-art effects and a slender vase (c. 1921) that takes advantage of the willowy grace of the feather. Siegfried Bing, the highly influential Art Nouveau dealer, wrote of Tiffany: "Just as in the natural feather itself, we find here a suggestion of the impalpable, the tenuity of the fronds and their pliability....Never, perhaps, has any man carried to greater perfection the art of faithfully rendering Nature in her most seductive aspects."² A Tiffany compote (1921) finds the essence of peacock beauty in an iridescent manifestation of sumptuous blue-green color.

Vookles cites a middle-brow home decorating journal from 1894 that underscores not just the popularity of the peacock but also a fairly sophisticated attitude about the value of stylization: "A conventionalization of the peacock as a motive produces a more agreeable affect than if the wall was

covered with an endless series of natural representations of the bird.”³ This argument in favor of synecdoche is borne out when we look at other vessels in the exhibition. A cream-colored earthenware vase (1886–90) by Edward Lytett—decorated, straightforwardly, with a pair of peacocks—is upstaged by an irregularly curvaceous Crown Derby vase (c. 1878–90) with an overall pattern of feather tips. Galileo Chini takes abstraction one step further in his Peacock Pattern Vase (c. 1900), using geometric peacock-feather eyes in a jazzy graphic style that anticipates Art Deco.

The peacock inspired decorative artists as a source of pattern and color. However much they chose to stylize the bird’s physical characteristics, they believed in nature as the wellspring of beauty. The great nineteenth-century book designer and theorist Walter Crane insisted that artists “may take motives or inspiration from the past, or from the present, it matters not, so long as their work has life and beauty—so long as it is organic, in short.”⁴

Beardsley took the peacock—organic, to be sure, but also bizarre enough to appeal to his decadent sensibilities—as the key to his designs for an 1894 edition of Oscar Wilde’s *Salome*. Gilt peacock feathers spread across the blue-green cover of the book, but the illustrations are all black and white. Without color or iridescence, the peacock becomes a vehicle of insinuating S-curves. In the play, Wilde mentions the bird only once, when Herod attempts to bribe Salome with a gift of 150 white peacocks (with purple stained feet, an extravagant touch). Beardsley dresses the women of the play in peacock style, emphasizing their sinister allure. In *The Eyes of Herod*, Herodias bares one breast and wears peacock feathers in her coiffeur. A peacock, cleverly pieced together from squiggly ornamental lines, stands at her feet. Two smirking baby satyrs flank a phallic candelabra, while Herod lurks in the background, voyeuristically. In *The Peacock Skirt*, Salome sweeps her train around in a whiplash curve, nearly engulfing John the Baptist. Fanned or furled, the peacock’s tail carries in its wake themes of pride, vanity and seduction.

As Crane noted, the distinctive Beardsley aesthetic drew on many sources, including “a curious weird Japanese-like spirit of diablerie and grotesque.”⁵ Ellen E. Roberts explores this connection in her catalogue essay, “The Japanese Peacock: A Cross-Cultural Sign.” We find traces of *japonisme*, an important component of the Aesthetic Movement enterprise, throughout the exhibition. Roberts discusses the apotheosis of the idea in James McNeill Whistler’s *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room* (1876–77), an immersive artwork that fully justifies a trip to the Freer Gallery in Washington, D.C. The shipping magnate Frederick Leyland commissioned the artist to create a backdrop for his collection of blue-and-white china in his London home. Whistler turned a decorating project into an aesthetic manifesto, beginning with his personal fusion of Eastern and Western art. Roberts remarks: “The Peacock Room looks nothing like any kind of traditional Japanese interior, but, with its gold-and-blue palette, does resemble a Japanese textile or a lacquer box turned inside

out.”⁶ Whistler exploits every aspect of the peacock, surrounding the visitor in opulent yet subtle color. He translates the bird’s plumage into splendid patterns. He evokes the personality of the peacock, with its raucous voice and pugnacious attitude. Whistler must have felt some kinship, given his well-honed persona as a sharp-tongued dandy and art-for-art’s-sake advocate. He included fighting birds in his design, stand-ins for the artist and his patron, who argued about money, among other things. Contemporary artist Darren Waterston recently explored that contentious relationship in his installation *Filthy Lucre*, a purposely ruined re-creation of Whistler’s artwork, at MASS MoCA, in North Adams, Massachusetts.⁷

The peacock’s ascendancy in the era of art for art’s sake, which coincided with the Gilded Age and a love of extravagant display, should not come as a surprise. While robber barons and aesthetes frequently disagreed about matters of taste, the peacock had an almost universal appeal. Exotic and extravagant, it seemed to exist to be looked at. Unlike the eagle and the dove, it carried no heavy burden of meaning; it did not invite interpretation by students of allegory or heraldry. The peacock figures in Hindu and Buddhist iconography, but that symbolism did not, in general, travel with the visual motif. In the Western tradition, the peacock represents, *in malo*, the sin of pride. William Blake, however, in one of his characteristically contrarian aphorisms from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, declared: “The pride of the peacock is the glory of God.” More arcanelly, the peacock is an emblem, *in bono*, of the Resurrection—from the belief, perpetuated in medieval bestiaries, that its flesh did not decay.

In Greco-Roman mythology, peacocks draw the chariot of Hera or Juno. The story of Argus sometimes crops up but remained a minor part of the myth: the bird’s blue and gold splendor was sufficient to justify its role as companion of the Queen of Heaven. The exhibition features a delightful image of Juno and her pets, *The Peacock’s Complaint*, from *The Baby’s Own Aesop* (1887), a book of verse fables by W.J. Linton. The verse hardly rises to the level of poetry:

The Peacock considered it wrong
That he had not the nightingale’s song;
So to Juno he went,
She replied, “Be content
With thy having and hold thy fool’s tongue!”

Walter Crane’s illustration, however, demonstrates his brilliance as a designer. Juno, in elegant profile, sits regally relaxed in her chariot, with a peacock’s tail fanned out behind her. Looking at this crisply opulent vision of antiquity, artistically sophisticated yet playful enough to charm the child-reader, you realize why Crane ranks high in this era, a golden age of book illustration.

The French painter Gustave Moreau took up the same theme in his watercolor *The Peacock Complaining to Juno* (1881–82),⁸ a more *symboliste* image, in

which a pale, Ingres-like goddess floats on her cloud-borne throne, suspended between sky and sea, both picking up the rich blue of her peacocks. Moreau painted the watercolor to accompany one of La Fontaine's *Fables*, in which Juno scolds the peacock for his jealousy of the melodious but drab nightingale: "You...who deploy/ So rich a tail and who seem to our eyes/ Like a jeweler's shop?" La Fontaine's characterization of the peacock's ornate beauty finds an echo in the catalogue for the Hudson River Museum exhibition. The essayists describe the bird as "outlandish and beguiling....Spectacular and theatrical." In the Introduction, Bartholomew F. Bland and Laura Vookles reproduce a period room installation replicating a Parisian jewelry store, *Boutique Fouquet* (1900), designed by Alphonse Mucha. Sculptural peacocks perch on a ledge and spread their tail feathers as the centerpiece of a luxurious display area, while the floor design depicts stylized peacock-feather eyes.

The peacock persisted after its fin-de-siècle heyday and was taken up by American artists less immersed than Whistler in the international cult of art for art's sake. The exhibition organizers have brought together some interesting examples by under-examined artists. William Baxter Palmer Closson's *Feeding the Peacocks* (by 1910) depicts a pretty girl in a grape arbor, who turns her attention to three domesticated-looking peacocks. While the sunny scene lacks mystery, Closson knows how to deploy dappled light effectively.

California painter Jessie Arms Botke made a career out of peacock pictures. The show featured two of her highly decorative works (both c. 1930). *Black Peacock* stars a gorgeous specimen, lifting his supple neck against the pale, flat backdrop, while his tail feathers cascade across a wide swath of the composition. Silhouetted leaves and red blossoms complete the image. Botke demonstrates familiarity with Japanese aesthetic strategies. By way of comparison, the exhibition includes two folding screens: Araki Kampo's *Peacock Pair by Cliffs* (1907) and Suzuki Kolyu's *Birds around a Cherry Tree in Spring* (1930). Botke's *Albino Peacock and Two Cockatoo* has a textured gold backdrop, like some Japanese screens. The birds, along with large white blossoms, stand out in a fairly realistic way. Her most striking effect centers on the pale feathers, which veil much of the surface. Botke's style fits comfortably within the parameters of Art Deco, yet the way she approaches the subject feels of a piece with the Romantic exoticism of the nineteenth century. Her albino peacock has a seductive dreaminess that brings to mind Lord Alfred Tennyson's lyric "Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white": "Now droops the milk-white peacock like a ghost, / And like a ghost, she glimmers onto me. / Now lies the earth all Danæ to the stars, / And all they heart likes open unto me."

The peacock proved an adaptable creature in the early decades of the twentieth century. Robert Henri—urban realist and star of the Ashcan School—seems an unlikely aficionado of the quintessentially decorative and decadent bird. Yet he created one of the strongest paintings in the exhibition, *Ruth St. Denis in the Peacock Dance* (1919). Henri enthusiastically championed

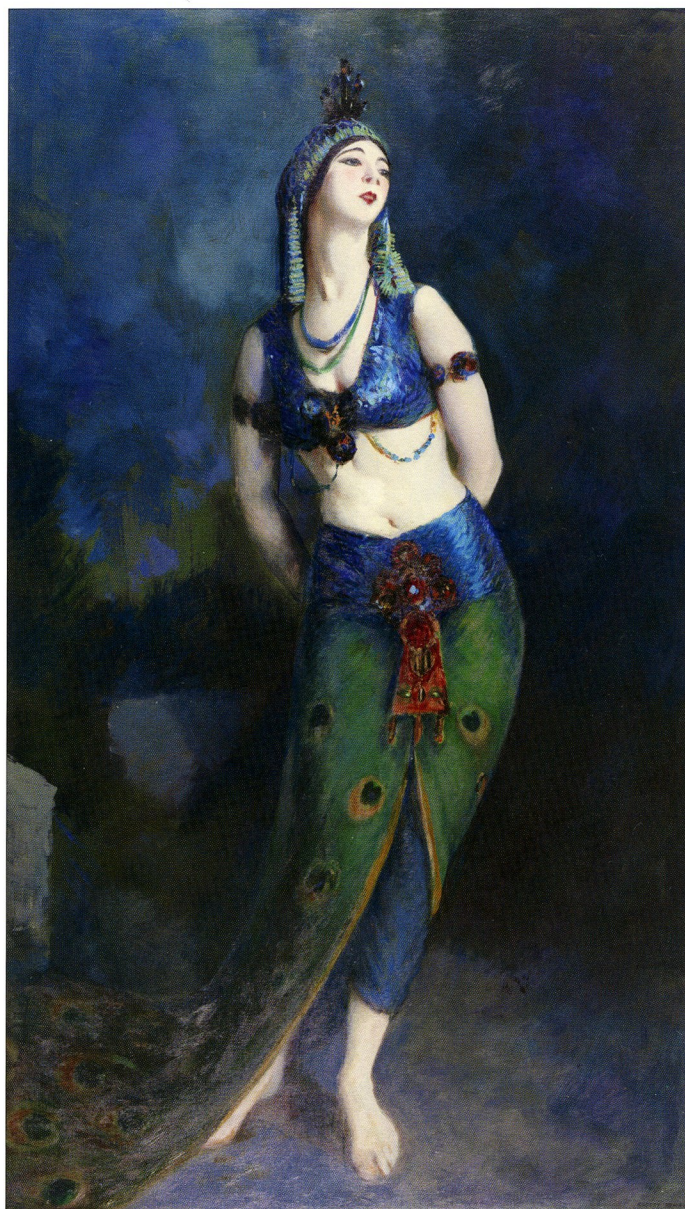
modern dance, the avant-garde choreography of innovators such as Isadora Duncan and St. Denis, who ignored classical Western technique to go barefoot and move expressively. In *The Legend of the Peacock*, St. Denis portrayed a Kashmiri princess trapped in the body of a peacock. She alluded only glancingly to the elaborate mudra of traditional Hindu ritual dance, while acknowledging the Indian origins and exotic beauty of the bird. (Period photographs are reproduced in the catalogue, and recent re-enactments of her choreography are available on several websites.)

In Henri's painting, St. Denis strikes a sinuous pose in her close-fitting peacock skirt and bra top, exposing her midriff in a costume that must have seemed provocative at the time. This is a realistic image of a stage performer who uses her body as her instrument. Henri celebrates the gleam of her blue costume as she steps out of the shadows and into the spotlight, her pale flesh, out-thrust hip, long neck and mask-like face. In the same year, Henri painted a dancer interpreting the role of Salome, showing a modern woman in black veils. She looks energetic and slightly risqué, closer to vaudeville than the hyper-stylized graphic femme fatale of Beardsley's illustrations for Oscar Wilde's play.

In the decorative arts, the modernist impulse manifested itself in some peculiar transformations of forms inherited from the fin-de-siècle, a development Kirsten M. Jensen explores in her essay, "Beauty and Function: The Peacock in Art Deco." A favorite métier of Art Deco, metal sculpture would not seem particularly suited to the luxuriance of peacock feathers. Yet Art Deco's characteristic streamlined aesthetic governs objects in the exhibition by Paulanship and Gaston Lachaise. In *Osborn Gates—The Crane and the Peacock* (1952), Manship depicts birds, plants and even clouds in openwork silhouettes. The feather etching on the peacock's tail is fetching, but the paddle shape of its display emphasizes the bird's earthbound nature. The crane, in contrast, spreads its wings and soars.

Lachaise folded the tails of his peacocks, designed to perch on columns in the garden of a Miami estate, shown in a photograph in the catalogue. His versions in bronze, *Peacock* (long tail) and *Peacock* (short tail), dated 1920, are remarkably sleek. Jensen notes the highly polished surface of the design, "which enhanced its clean lines and engineered quality." If the Art Nouveau peacock (and its descendants, like Botke's swooning beauties) embodies a certain languid hedonism, the Art Deco peacock suggests a more fast-paced luxury, like a Bugatti sports car. *Four Peacocks*, a decorative screen by Robert Winthrop Chandler (1927), which Jensen describes as having an "unnerving"¹⁰ effect, depicts elongated creatures racing along frenetically.

In addition to explorations of the theme in the fine and decorative arts (remarkably fluid categories around the fin-de-siècle), the exhibition presented a healthy dose of popular imagery. This strategy underscores the pervasiveness of the peacock in the wider visual culture and leavens the hothouse



Robert Henri
*Ruth St. Denis in
 the Peacock Dance*
 1919

COURTESY OF
 PENNSYLVANIA
 ACADEMY OF
 THE FINE ARTS,
 PHILADELPHIA,
 PENNSYLVANIA

atmosphere. A couple of cartoons by Edward Linley Sambourne, from *Punch* magazine, satirize the vanity of fashionistas, who parade in peacock skirts (*As Birds' Feathers and Train Dresses Are All the Go, Miss Swellington Adopts One of Nature's Designs*, 1867) and peacock coiffeurs (*Mr. Punch's Design after Nature, Grand Back-Hair Sensation for Coming Season*, 1871). More celebratory instances of peacock-feather fashion include Wladyslaw-Benda's *Life* magazine cover, *Woman with Peacock Headdress* (1922); peacock-feather fans (c. 1828 and late



William Seltzer Rice, *Pride Steps Forth*, c. 1930

COLLECTION OF THE TWO RED ROSES FOUNDATION, PALM HARBOR, FLORIDA

nineteenth century) and several small handbags, among them a velvet beaded purse (c. 1985) and a Judith Leiber Peacock-Shaped Multicolor Rhinestone Minaudière (2004). An ad for Holeproof Hosiery, by Coles Phillips (1942), features a flapper in a black slip posed in front of a peacock in full display. The Hudson River Museum draws on its collection of ephemera—greeting, tobacco and trade cards, magazine covers, illustrations and advertisements—to show the more playful side of peacock iconography.

The peacock was an obvious choice for poster art, which blossomed in the late nineteenth century in the wake of advances in chromolithography. (Later, NBC would adopt a rainbow-tailed peacock as its network logo to promote color television.) An Art Deco calendar (1934) in this exhibition, by Edward

Mason Eggleston, depicts Cleopatra in an opulent palette of red, gold, flesh-tone and peacock blue (which carries over from the queen's pet to the evening sky). Exchanges between commercial art and more ambitious disciplines were lively. St. Denis conceived the idea for her first success, the Isis dance, from an Egyptomania-influenced cigarette poster.

A number of handsome prints demonstrated the coloristic possibilities of the theme. Louis Rhead's *La Femme au Paon* (1897) is a lithograph composed in rich colors along sinuous Art Nouveau curves. In his relief etching *Sic Transit Gloria Mundi* (c. 1924), William Giles adopts a softer palette, expanding the peacock's fan tail into a roseate sunset. William Seltzer Rice, in his knockout woodblock print *Pride Steps Forth* (c. 1930) puts the bird center stage, letting the tail display fill the page and emphasizing the tough, heavy feet. His peacock is a formidable creature, its blue feathers given intensity by the brooding, dark colors of the overall design.

The organizers included a score of peacock-inspired works by contemporary artists. The selection was a stylistically mixed lot: while the sumptuous creature no longer enjoys its fin-de-siècle hegemony, it is resurfacing in some intriguing ways. Darren Waterston's *Pavo* (2014)—the title refers to the peacock's genus—is an off-shoot of his *Filthy Lucre* project. Waterston refers to the deep blue painting as a nocturne, in homage to Whistler, and there are suggestions of peacock heads and talons in what is essentially an abstraction. In *Flock* (1997), Helen Flockhart depicts a peacock in full display, along with a frieze of drabber birds, in a dark wood. A girl—a rather cartoonish figure, although her face is a convincing mask of wonder and fear—has come upon an enigmatic apparition. This unsettling image brings to mind the sinister side of peacock lore, beautifully captured in Wallace Stevens's poem "The Domination of Black," which associates the raucous "cry of the peacocks" with hemlocks, symbols of death. Penelope Fritzer discusses Stevens's poem, along with works by Flannery O'Connor, Marianne Moore and others, in her catalogue essay, "The Peacock in Literature."

The gorgeously illustrated catalogue covers a lot of historical territory, in both art and popular culture, but the organizers choose a contemporary work for the cover, a large detail from James Prosek's *Peacock and Cobra* (2013). Prosek, a naturalist-artist, acknowledges the influence of South Asian miniatures. He uses—precisely and with great delicacy—watercolor, gouache, powdered mica, colored pencil and graphite, on tea-stained paper. The peacock and the cobra confront each other under a crescent moon. In another work in the exhibition, *Peacock Cobra II* (2013), Prosek combines the two creatures in an exotic hybrid, building on an analogy between the cobra's hood and the peacock's tail to create an imaginary being both dangerous and mesmerizingly beautiful. "Strut: The Peacock and Beauty in Art" was on view October 11, 2014–January 18, 2015, at the Hudson River Museum, 511 Warburton Avenue, Yonkers, New York 10701. Telephone (914) 963-4550. hrm.org

NOTES

1. Bartholomew F. Bland and Laura Vookles, eds., *Strut: The Peacock and Beauty in Art* (New York: Hudson River Museum and Fordham University Press, 2014), p. 62.
2. Alice Cooney Frelinghuysen, *Louis Comfort Tiffany at the Metropolitan Museum*, *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* (Summer 1998), pp. 57–58.
3. *Strut*, p. 60.
4. Walter Crane, *Of the Illustration of Books Old and New* [1896] (London: George Bell and Sons, 1972), p. 209.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
6. *Strut*, p. 91.
7. *Filthy Lucre* travels to the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, adjacent to the Freer Gallery of Art, home of Whistler's *Peacock Room*, in Washington, D.C. Waterston's work will be on view there from May 16, 2015 through December 2016 (exact closing date not yet finalized).
8. The Moreau watercolor, not on view in "Strut", is reproduced in Geneviève Lacambre, et al., *Gustave Moreau: Between Epic and Dream* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, in association with Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 194.
9. *Strut*, p. 101.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

FOR CURRENT MUSEUM AND GALLERY LISTINGS,
PLEASE VISIT OUR WEBSITE AT:
<http://www.nccsc.net/painting>