

Walter Sickert's Music-Hall Scenes and Theatricality of Modern Experience

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Abstract

Most studies, regarding Walter Sickert as a dispassionate flâneur, have focused on the significance of social realism and criticism in his music-hall scenes. Previous studies have also tended to analyze his formal and technical mastery and his role as a major forerunner of modern British art. This article attempts to consider Sickert's works of music halls from another point of view, arguing that his connection of the artificiality of painting with that of performance is a metaphor for the theatricality of modern experience. With the use of mirrors and theatrical devices, Sickert's music hall is frequently represented in such an ambiguous perspective that the spatial relationship between the performer and audience is confused. The perplexities and deception of the painted surfaces further turn the identities of the audience and performer into uncertainty. Theatricality transcended the reality of everyday life, but it also threatened the Victorian belief in the truthfulness of truth and the true self. Through a series of London music-hall paintings, Sickert disclosed social and cultural concerns of the period. Just like the theatricality of performances, these paintings, with their disoriented vision and form, reveal the essential in authenticity of urban, modern experience and the complexity and uncertainty of identity.

Keywords: Walter Sickert, music halls, theatricality, theatrical identity, Victorian popular culture, male gaze

Introduction

In the late 19th century, the music hall was one of the most popular theatrical entertainments in Britain. It provided the audience an escape from their working life and a vital shared experience in an increasingly fragmented urban society. As an intimate, but vibrant public space, the music hall providing liberating and exhilarating experiences, was an antidote to the Victorian facade of respectability. It was frequently commended in literary circles. Arthur Symons, Max Beerbohm and Ernest Dowson all considered this urban entertainment as a valid although low form of art (Faulk, 2004, 53). However, the subject of music hall was overlooked by the Victorian painters of modern life. Walter Richard Sickert (1860-1942) was the first painter who turned to this theatrical entertainment in his desire to capture the essence of modern experience, which in turn was performed through the surface of entertainment.

As a major connection between French and English art at the end of the 19th century, Sickert's modernity continued to be considered within the definitions of French modernism. Concepts such as the spectacle, the flâneur, and notion of urban leisure have been applied to his paintings of the London music halls in reference to their significance as social realism and criticism of the period (Robins, 1995, 87-96). While selecting subjects from the contemporary urban scenes to create accuracy of vision in representation, Sickert always kept aesthetic interest in mind, committed to exploring the idea of a purely formal painting. Accordingly, most previous studies have tended to read his work in terms of its form, color and drawing, analyzing his formal and technical mastery, as well as his role as a major forerunner of modern British art. Most scholars have a tendency to evade the theatrical influence on his art, describing the artist as a man primarily interested in formal and painterly problems (Emmons, 1941, Ch. 5). Wendy Baron suggests Sickert painted the human figure for his interest in the formal problems posed by the human figures. His interest in the material qualities of paint on canvas was more important than the narrative in his subjects. (Baron, 1973, 184). David Peters Corbett has also emphasized Sickert's paintings should not be considered only for their dramatic narrative, but should be studied from the quality of their materiality.

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For Corbett, Sickert considered his music-hall subjects from the perspective of the capacity of paint itself to act as a means of investigating and diagnosing modern experiences, therefore the material itself is more important than the subjects (Corbett, 2004, 169-213). Matthew Sturgis proposes that Sickert endlessly searched for the pictorial ideal. Visual narratives are subordinate to his real focus, namely his art (Sturgis, 2005, 2). This article attempts to consider Sickert's images of music halls from another point of view, arguing that his connection of the artificiality of painting with that of performance is a metaphor for the theatricality of modern experience, as it reflects how the late Victorians constructed themselves at the convergence between everyday life and theatrical performance.

Walter Sickert

Sickert's reputation as a painter of music halls was consolidated in 1889 when he obtained a position at the center of the New English Art Club, a progressive group of French-influenced realist artists. According to Corbett, between 1887 and 1907, Sickert produced his music-hall subjects in three series. The first period was from around 1887 to 1889 when mirrors play an important role in the composition. The second period was between 1894 and 1898 when he concentrated on the descriptions of the audience at the Bedford Music Hall in Camden Town. The third period began in 1905, but the subject and composition was different from the previous two periods (Corbett, 2002, 287). This article only focuses on Sickert's paintings of London music hall from 1887 to 1898, when he used the New English Art Club as the main platform for showing his works to the public and explored extensively the complexities of pictorial space and relationship between the spectator and performer. The article considers how Sickert composed his music-hall subjects in relation to his obsession with visual modernity and theatricality, which in turn reveals Victorian social and culture concerns about identity and the ambivalence of the private and public self.

Sickert's various scenes of music halls, vaudeville stars, theater audiences and portraits of actors in the 1930s are ostensibly the essence of his work. The theatricality that existed for the most part in his works permeated his life. Having worked briefly as an actor, Sickert had a life-long fascination with performing arts, both as participant and as spectator. Owing to his experiences in the theater, he frequently changed names and physical appearance. Often dressed up in theatrical way and taking on different identities, Sickert was well known for his theatrical self-constructions. His appearance and escapade were noted regularly in the press. His biographer Emmons once claimed that Sickert was all performance and no essence (Emmon, 1941, 4). In his memoirs, Clive Bell asserted that "Sickert was a poseur besides being a great painter." (Bell, 1956, 22) Like his mentor James Abbot McNeill Whistler, Sickert was interested in the idea of theatrical identity in terms of acting and the character of artist and self-promotion. He was well aware of how to fashion a reputation by acutely engaging himself in the spectacular culture of modernity. Theatricality was the way he constructed and visualized himself.

Theatricality

The notion of theatricality has taken many forms during its history, because of this, its meaning is difficult to grasp. Historically theatrical metaphors have often been employed in anti-theatrical discourses to suggest notions of inauthenticity and deception (Tronstad, 2002, 216-224). The Victorians continued to be suspicious of acting and theatricality, even though acting became an increasingly acceptable middle-class profession. Nina Auerbach in her influential book *Private Theatricals: the Lives of the Victorians* observes that "within Victorian culture, the theater came to stand for all the dangerous potential of theatricality to invade the authenticity of the best self." (Auerbach, 1990, 8) She writes that "[r]everent Victorians shunned theatricality as the ultimate, deceitful mobility. It connotes not only lies, but a fluidity of character that decomposes the uniform integrity of the self." (Auerbach, 1990, 4) Unsurprisingly many Victorians believed in an authentic core identity that was separated from an external performing artificial self. In consequence, the theatrical entertainments in the music halls activated the Victorians' anxieties regarding the inauthenticity and deception of theatricality. On the one hand, these anxieties were mainly situated within the circle of the social elites who felt threatened by music halls' cross class appeal. On the other, theatricality not only challenged Victorian belief in the integrity of sincere self, but also functioned as a menacing reminder of the histrionic artifice of everyday life.

Be that as it may, this deep-rooted anti-theatrical view has recently been challenged by scholars. Lynn Voskuil argues authenticity and theatricality was not that mutually exclusive for the Victorians. "[A]uthenticity accommodates a range of shifting, sometimes rival meanings in the nineteenth century as it does today." (Voskuil, 1995, 410) Authenticity was deemed not as essentialism, but as one part of construction process in the late nineteenth century. The Victorians, in reality, understood that no one was ever free from acting and performing, therefore, the idea of authentic behavior was indeed disruptive for the psyche and problematic for identity.

Taking theatricality as a metaphor to explore the ways in which acting pervaded everyday life, Victorians, such as Oscar Wilde, Whistler, Sickert and many others, were exceptionally conscious of themselves as performative personae. Their theatrical and often exaggerated self-representations seemed to yield themselves to a presumption of the self as “a contingent cluster of theatrical roles.” (Litvak, 1992, xii)

Sickert's Music-Hall Paintings

The late Victorian music hall was a problematic place. Unlike the conventional theatres, music-halls served alcohol throughout the programme to noisy, volatile spectators with a fondness for audience participation. The music-halls' associations with drink, frolics and prostitution made it a prime target for hostility from the moral guardians. (Robins, 1992, 13) For the social purity campaigners, alcoholism and prostitution made the music hall an equally sordid and morally damaging environment. Yet, for Sickert, who was fascinated with the theatrical and low life, the music hall was the perfect location to explore the duality and theatricality of late Victorian society and to represent fragments of urban life and his own modern vision of London in his works.

Sickert's music-hall paintings are based principally on on-the-spot sketches. The theatrical experience is a spontaneous one, therefore, difficult to capture visually on canvas or in a photograph. However, Sickert, through his works, was able to provide the viewer with a sense of the visual and emotional experience of the theater. His early music-hall paintings follow the simple, logical compositional arrangements of Degas's theater and ballet pictures, with an emphasis on odd angles of vision and on the need to paint from his drawing in the studio, not from life. The painting entitled *Gatti's Hungerford Palace of Varieties: Second Turn of Miss Katie Lawrence* (Figure 1), first shown at the New English Art Club exhibition of 1888, immediately caused storm of controversy. The cause of the critics' disgust can be identified in the painting's pictorial effect that depicts the predatory male gaze intruding into the public space towards an exhibited female body on a raised stage. The painting is a bold experiment to sketch a slice of the crowd, which obviously hints at the taint of sexuality in music halls. (Baron, 1970, 186-97) In all probability, Sickert simply participates in the audience's excited response to the act by sitting behind the audience. However, by making the audience his subject as much as the performer on stage, he is detached from them. This viewing position gives him anonymity in this dark public and private space. Here a disinterested view is entangled with a sexualized spectacle of male viewer and female subject. (Shone, 1992, 10)

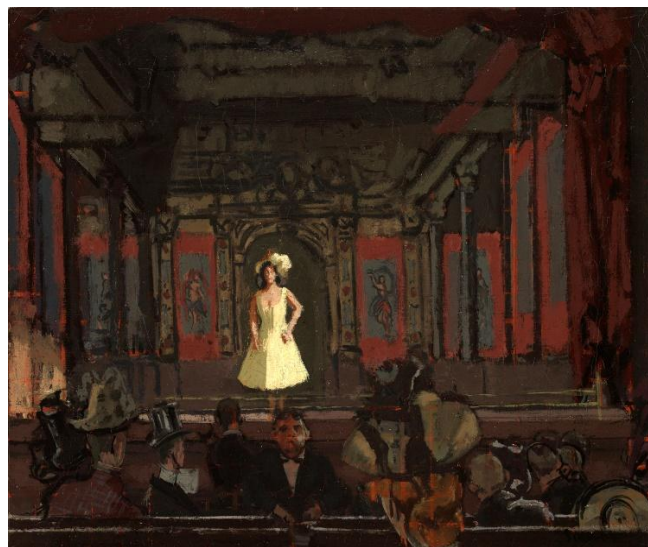


Figure 1. Walter Sickert, *Gatti's Hungerford Palace of Varieties: Second Turn of Miss Katie Lawrence*, c. 1888, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.

Like his French counterparts, Sickert also struggled to evolve a set of visual language to represent bourgeois modernity, which was rooted especially in the English experience. And it was in his paintings of the Bedford Music Hall that he first abandoned the simpler Degas formula to develop a new schema of pictorial devices to present his subject—a comprehensive view of performer and audience, stage and auditorium. The Bedford Music Hall was an old-style music-hall dating from 1861 with vast mirrors in the interior. *Little Dot Hetherington at the Bedford Music Hall* (Figure 2) and *The P.S. Wings in the O.P. Mirror* (Figure 3) (both Bedford scenes) are the first examples of Sickert's use of a looking-glass as an integral part of his compositions. (Baron, 2006, 20)



Figure 2. Walter Sickert, *Little Dot Hetherington at the Bedford Music Hall*, 1888-89, private collection.

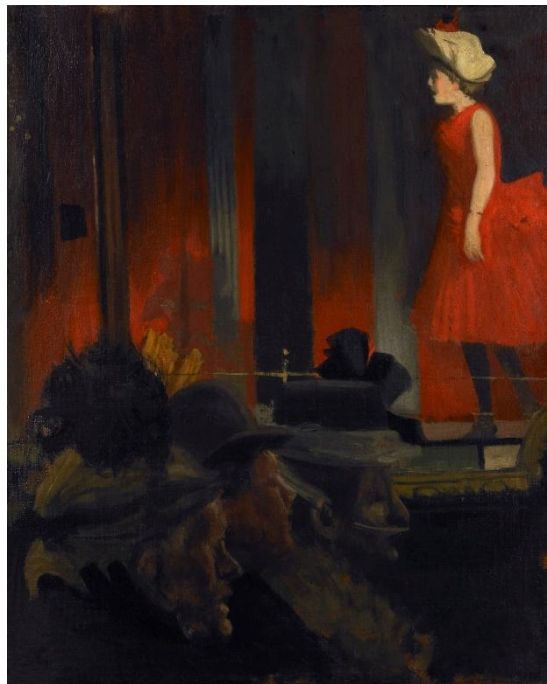


Figure 3. Walter Sickert, *The P.S. Wings in the O.P. Mirror*, c. 1889, Musee des Beaux Arts, Rouen.

In both paintings, Sickert was experimenting with a complicated pictorial strategy. The definition of the real spatial plane is obscure and ambiguous, because a major part of each subject is represented through its reflection in a looking-glass which creates a misleading space where other elements like the audience is included inside the represented space of the painting. In *Little Dot Hetherington at the Bedford Music Hall*, the female child performer, Little Dot, is twice reflected in double mirrors. As Robins points out, the image not only plays into contemporary interest in role playing and masking divided selves (Robins, 1992, 18), it also refers to the doubly performative nature of identity in performance. The disoriented and inconsistent picture space and the disposition of persons in relation to the performer confound one's perception in a manner that mirrors the confusion and multiplicity of simultaneous perceptions within a crowded space. Sickert's painting reflects our phenomenological, sensual and visual experience in the unusual formal structures.

In *Vesta Victoria at the Old Bedford* (Figure 4), featuring the singer and comedian Vesta Victoria, the space is deceptive as well. What we initially perceive to be the stage is revealed to be a reflection, with a large mirror that sets up a contrast between the indistinct figures of the gallery with the singer's elaborate performance.(Robins, 1992, 16-17)In depicting Vesta directing her gesture towards the audience, and they in turn paying their full attention on her, Sickert identifies his audience as a collective entity, sharing the same experience and desire while at the same time emphasizing the fascinating power of the singer's performance.(Rough, 2009, 141)

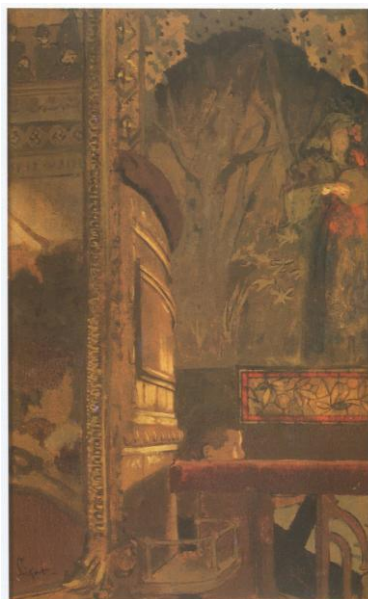


Figure 4. Walter Sickert, *Vesta Victoria at the Old Bedford*, c. 1890, private collection.

In these paintings, Sickert obliterates the boundary between the performer and audience. With the use of mirrors, painted backdrops and theatrical devices, Sickert's music hall is frequently represented in such ambiguous perspective that the spatial relationship between the performer and audience is confused. The painting is disturbing and absorbing. It constantly challenges one's eye's apparent mastery of the scene. While the scrutiny of the painting by the eye may suggest, briefly, a whole and complete world over which one has control, the awareness of the reflection disrupts this feeling of power and stability. There is something unreachable. The 'reality' one is looking at is a mirage.

The perplexities and deception of the painted surfaces further turn the identities of the audience and performer into uncertainty. The leering youths that surround Little Dot are not only spectators but an integral part of the performance itself. The watching faces actually become the 'frame' that encloses the singer with both their gaze and their actual forms. The collective nature of the male gaze becomes the most distinctive features in these paintings. (Robins, 1992, 15) Certainly, there is a sense of predatory unity in the audience's collective attention to the singer. Sickert's Little Dot is performing the music-hall standard "The boy I Love is Up in the Gallery." The popular song, with sexual innuendo, was delivered as a first person narrative. This type of performance, exploiting the duality of innocence and experience of young girls, was a popular one in the music halls. Child performers were a cult within Sickert's extended circle. It was also a favorite theme of writers and poets, such as Max Beerbohm and Ernest Dowson at Oxford in the 1880s. (Douglas-Fairhurst, 2016, 111)

In the seminal article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," published in *Screen* in 1975, Laura Mulvey stresses how "cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire." (Mulvey, 1988, 67) The voyeurism and wish-fulfillment fantasy that Mulvey finds in Hollywood cinema are prefigured in the performance of late Victorian music halls, as in Sickert's vision, Little Dot is turned into an object of sexual curiosity and eroticized looking. The male audience on the other hand, revels the female performer as spectacle with the sadistic power of the bearer of the gaze. Theater culture was largely deemed inappropriate for women during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Margaret Stetz notes a late-Victorian lady was discouraged from being part of a theater audience. (Stetz, 2004, 52) Interestingly, within Sickert's masculine view of spectacles and spaces of the music-hall scene, women are also among the audience, gazing at the female performer attentively, as if they find visual pleasure in the sexist performance as well. Mulvey points out that social structures and symbolic life position women unconsciously to see as a man. (Mulvey, 1988, 70) That is to say, women reaffirm sexist ideas which are socially internalized. The reproduction of patriarchal thinking patterns at an unconscious level means that male pleasure also inflects women's spectatorship, as reflected in Sickert's painting. In Victorian music halls, audiences were encouraged to engage themselves fully in the entertainment, through singing and conversing with performers. A crowd of individuals were brought together by their communal responses to the acts on the stage. In their shared excitement over the performance, their different class backgrounds, gender roles, characters became one encircling and homogeneous mass.

In these images of music hall, the audience's absorption in the spectacle brings to mind Michael Fried's famous criticism of theatricality. Fried describes the self-conscious and inter-subjective effects that he perceives in certain minimalist art works as inauthentic and deceptive, thus, theatrical.

According to Fried's understanding of the essential in authenticity of the theater, "theater means magic and seduction; absorbed in its spectacles we surrender ourselves." (Fried, 1998, 163) Indeed, absorbed in the spectacles, Sickert's audience seem to temporarily break away from their everyday life and surrender themselves. The magic and seduction of the music halls momentarily transform gender, racial and class identities of the performers and their audiences as well. This dynamic relationship between audience and performer that provides a vicarious delight of mutually authenticating reactions is at the very center of the theatrical experience. (Voskuil, 2002, 247)

Sickert's pictorial space was produced as a spectacle in and through the ongoing production and consumption of images. By 1895, Sickert's interest had transferred from performers to the lower class sections of the audience, chiefly up in the gallery. Taking the cheapest seats in the halls, these young spectators were the noisiest and mischievous part of the audience and always engaged enthusiastically with the performance. The various versions of *The Gallery of the Old Bedford* (Figure 5), with a visual contrast between the drab, grey color of the male audience and the elaborate ornamentation of the gilded mirrors and gallery decoration, demonstrate again the music hall audience itself is the object of observation in the painter's vision.

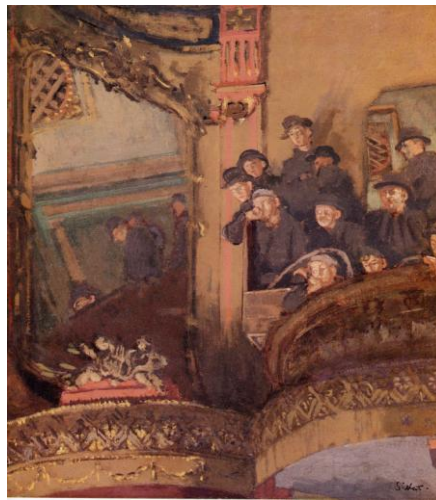


Figure 5. Walter Sickert, *The Gallery of the Old Bedford*, c. 1895, Trustees of the National Museums and Galleries of Merseyside (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool).

In this painting, it is the dichotomy between fantasy and reality that truly interests Sickert. Though the captivated attention and the loss of the self in the act of spectatorship indicate a direct involvement with the world, however, by concentrating on the audience alone, Sickert discloses the audiences' relationship with the performer is in fact a fantasy in that the audience's rapt absorption is provoked not by immediate reality but by theatrical performance which deceives them and their fascinated observation.

David Peters Corbett argues that against an increasingly superficial urban society, people in the late nineteenth century lost faith in the ability of written or spoken language to convey an absolute truth. Victorian painters of modern life imagined that they could represent the world on the painted surface in an authentic, and thus unmediated fashion. (Corbett, 2000, 287) The materiality of painted surface allows artists like Sickert to explore the theatricality and reality of modern life experience. Sickert believed the physical experience of the viewer's reaction to the materiality of painted surface could impart an authentic, truthful experience, as he "sets the dialectic between essence and surface in motion by drawing attention to the theatricality and the falsity of the stage as a surface in his depiction of his music hall scenes." (Corbett, 2000, 287) He might feel that the authenticity and reality of modern experience could be best revealed through the disorderliness of music halls represented in his works. However, the functionality and theatricality of the music hall performance remind us that the revelations offered to us through Sickert's original viewing of the performance and as subject for his painting are artificial too. The viewer is made conscious of the artificiality of the experience both in terms of performance on the stage and painted surface as well. Drawing on the roles of flâneur as spectator and spectator as artist proposed by Baudelaire, Anna Robins has suggested that we understand Sickert as an English flâneur in terms of the social modernity of his subject matter. (Robins, 1995, 89) As Baudelaire was concerned with what could be represented, with image as artifice and construction, bearing the visual codes of ephemeral modernity (Drucker, 1994, 17), equally, Sickert's work was never about the real, the accuracy of vision, but about the image, its viability and readability as a set of elements that signified ephemerality, fragmentation, artificiality and theatricality which encapsulated the essence of modern life in the music halls.

Conclusion

There is no denying that Sickert was mainly concerned with the way that paint, the medium itself, could explore as well as reflect modern experience. However, by capturing the ephemeral power of the performance, Sickert's music hall paintings was also meant to reflect the notion of theatricality inherent in late Victorian society and his own theatrical identities as well. Sickert's music hall paintings reflect not only the notion of theatricality inherent in late Victorian society but also his own theatrical identities as well. Through these images, Sickert unveiled social and cultural anxieties of his time. Theatricality, on the one hand, threatened the Victorian belief in the trustworthiness of truth and the true self, but on the other, it enacted a debate between truth in the visible surfaces of the world and truth in what is invisible, beneath or behind those surfaces.

Sickert's music hall paintings offer us metaphors for the difficulty of understanding modern life simply by attending the realism of its surface appearance. Just like the theatricality and therefore unreality of performances, these paintings, with their disoriented vision and form, reveal the essential in authenticity of urban, modern experience and the complexity and uncertainty of identity.

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